

***The Detectives***  
**A Collection of Short Crime Fiction**

**Steven M. Moore**

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## General Preface

Detectives are ubiquitous protagonists in many mystery, thriller, and suspense stories. This collection of short crime fiction celebrates them in the only way I know how, highlighting their adventures and exploits from current times to far into the future (so there's a bit of sci-fi here as well, an illustration of why I hate to be pigeon-holed into restrictive genres). My sleuths are often cops or PIs, but they can have duties that go beyond local policing as well. They are all crimefighters.

Some of these stories are original to this collection. Others first appeared in my writer's blog at <https://stevenmmoore.com>. (See the "Steve's Shorts," "ABC Shorts," and "Friday Fiction" archives if you're looking for publication history.) They might even have appeared in other collections by accident! (I write a lot, and it's difficult to keep it all straight.)

Most characters are new in the sense they haven't appeared in publications you can purchase; they show how diverse detectives can be. Others are characters from my novels who have encores here. For example, "A Life Not Lived" and "Cold Case Blues" are about two of Detective Castilblanco's early cases, while "Dreams of Revenge" occurs after Castilblanco and his wife adopt their two children and live in a NYC suburb (that story used to be a free stand-alone PDF download, but I decided to include it here instead). "The Novice" features Esther Brookstone, the "Art Detective," in her role as MI6 spy during the Cold War (the story is more suspense than mystery or thriller), while "The North-Counties Tale" finds Esther in the role that made her famous in art circles in the UK and the continent.

The common denominator here is that they're all detective stories of one form or another. Okay, the first Brookstone story, like flashbacks in her novels, shows some of the events that made Esther into an effective detective, and the detective in "Computer Games" is an FBI agent.

There's a lot of reading here. I hope you enjoy all these tales as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Steve Moore  
Montclair, NJ, 2022

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**A Life Not Lived**  
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**Preface**

If you read my short story "The Case of the Carriageless Horse" in the anthology, *World Enough and Crime*, or listened to my inimitable Canadian friend and editor of that anthology, Donna Carrick, read it in her podcast (see the "Home Page" of my website for a link—it's the closest thing you'll find to an audiobook in my oeuvre), you know that its subject is Detective Castilblanco's first case. This is another early case, something like a sequel to that first story. Chen is around somewhere, just not yet Castilblanco's partner.

**Chapter One**

I went to greet Rob Jackson when he got out of prison. My old mentor at NYPD, Al Dempsey, had put him there twenty-six years earlier for the rape and murder of a teenage girl. I wasn't partnered with Dempsey back then, but I thought he'd want me to express regrets to Rob. Our justice system not only moves slow; it can make some really bad mistakes. Good old DNA freed Rob and made the crime into a cold case.

Rob spit to the side of me after giving me the finger—couldn't blame him for taking out on me his frustration—and said, "Dempsey was a bro, but the SOB always believed I did it. May he rot in hell!"

"He still would have been here, even if you don't believe it. Can I drive you somewhere?"

"The Bronx." He now managed to direct a smile my way. Maybe he figured I wasn't responsible for his misery? "Thanks. Need to see the old 'hood before moving on. I have a bus ticket, but you'll get me there faster."

"Where will you go after that?" I said, knowing ex-cons often received a raw deal from society, wherever they ended up. And, in this case, it was society that had really committed the crime!

"Got some family in North Carolina. They tell me our kind doesn't get much respect down there, but they're the only family I got."

I nodded. That Mason-Dixon line still indicated about as far south as I liked to get. Hispanics weren't popular down there either, and, taking states' rights to the limit, both Blacks and Hispanics had a hard time voting down there, so nothing much changed for the better—it had only become worse, in fact.

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Rob became mute at the beginning of our journey but opened up a bit later as his justifiably sour attitude dissipated.

"You must know how it is, Castilblanco. You get two strikes 'gainst you just for being born in the Bronx and being black, Puerto Rican in your case, and the damn place gives you the third one really quick-like. I had my first knife fight at eight."

"It's tough," I admitted. "Anyone who survives that deserves a combat medal."

"You're ex-military, right?" I nodded. "That's one way to escape the damn place. Did combat seem as bad as here for minorities?"

"Different, because you're fighting jerks who lump all Americans together as the enemy. In the Bronx, you're white, black, Hispanic, whatever. Often seemed like warring tribes. It's better now, Rob."

"I read the rags and listen to news. You could be right. Just want to see for myself."

We then talked about a lot of things—family, religion, politics; most things a guy inside might want to hear about when he gets outside. Prison life sucks.

I left him at an old friend's place. Teddy was in a wheelchair, so Rob had to bend down to give him a big hug.

## Chapter Two

Two weeks later Rob was murdered. Teddy called me, but I already had the case. Felt kind of weird going through the preliminary motions when the victim was someone I'd just met...and liked. Old ME gave me the silent treatment for the most part but got enough info out of him to know it was murder, another one for this new homicide detective, but a case I didn't particularly want.

"Do you want to recuse yourself?" my lieutenant said.

"No, I'd like to bring Rob's murderer to justice."

"Then get outta here and do it, or do you need me to change your diaper first?"

Lieutenant was like that. Didn't put much stock in my service record overseas or the few cases I'd already solved. So, I started to snoop around the Bronx. Knew it well enough. Hadn't changed much, but I was seeing things through my cop eyes now—a prodigal son who'd left by his own will and didn't quite feel at home there now.

My first stop was *Gretchen's Grill*. That grill is really a sleazy bar, and Gretchen was really Smiley, a big black fellow with a squished nose who probably never had the need for a bouncer. Nice guy, though, and Teddy had hung out there, recently taking Rob along with him. Teddy had suggested I talk to Smiley.

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I had to look up at Smiley...literally. I'm not a small man, but he's really big! With that gap in his upper teeth, he looked a bit like Strahan on steroids. Shook my hand, leaving it numb.

"Nice guy, that fellow Rob. Talk about bad luck. Never got to live his life." He eyed me from up there in the clouds. "You put him away?"

"My old partner. He'd be regretting it now."

"Lady Justice is blind, as they say." He thought a moment. "I'd check with Mr. Grasso. He knows most everything bad that's going or gone down in this city."

Grasso was a local mobster. Hadn't met him yet; didn't know if I wanted to.

"And he does nothing about it?"

"He's responsible for some of it. Won't tell you about that, I 'spose. If he's not involved, he might help you, though. To eliminate the competition, you know."

What's the adage? The enemy of my enemy is my friend? I went to see Grasso. Wasn't in his usual hangout. I told his toadies I'd be back in the morning.

## Chapter Three

Morning meant eleven in mobster time. Gangsters tend to have late nights, doing crap never seen in movies. I get home late but not that late—different kind of crap—I watch the Channel 7 news. That's a lot more legal than what Grasso probably did, although I do have a crush on one crime reporter I admire from afar. Maybe I'll have a case where I'll meet Pam Stuart someday?

So, I easily kept more or less to Grasso's schedule, showing up at the little cafe in Little Italy from where he ran his fiefdom. He was sitting on a bar stool snarfing down fried eggs and bacon and drinking black coffee. Thought he might need the sugar—he didn't look sweet and lovable.

He waved away my badge. "Guys told me about your visit yesterday. Want some coffee?"

I nodded. Figured it would be impolite to say no, and who knew what a mob boss would do if you were impolite to him?

"What can I do for you, detective?"

We were eyeing each other over the brims of our mugs. Wasn't a blinking contest. More like X-raying each other, trying to figure out what was inside. Or whether the other guy deserved any respect?

"Rob Jackson was murdered. Any idea who did it?"

Wasn't mentioning Smiley sent me. The bartender could become a big target for Grasso's gang. Thought he might be useful in the future, for a drink or for some other intel. Bartenders know a lot because they hear a lot.

"Probably the same guy who committed the crime that sent Rob upstate."

"And who could that be?"

Oh boy, solve Rob's murder and a cold case too!

"Not one of my boys, that's for sure. The victim was Italian and fifteen. I'd cut off the balls of any of my guys who'd dare do something like that to one of ours."

I smiled at the "one of ours." What Rob had been talking about: The old tribalism.

My city is more diverse than most in the US—lots of different languages spoken here, for example. Generally speaking, all the tribes get along and work together, a model for the country—well, not for the South, where they haven't changed since the American Revolution. Most people are hard-working and family-oriented, despite what conservative naysayers say about us elsewhere. But like everywhere else, there are some rotten apples in the Big Apple. As a cop, I have to deal with them, but I always try to remain objective, unlike those conservative naysayers. Fact is, I couldn't survive in my city without my family history and upbringing.

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"Let's forget nationalities," I told Grasso. "Did Rob have enemies back then?"

"I heard he hung out with some tough kids, including Teddy Fulton. Fought among themselves a lot as well as with others, mostly your people." I raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Grasso got the message, I think, but ignored it. "Yeah, Puerto Ricans. Not bad kids, any of 'em, considering, but I heard that one Puerto Rican kid, Ricardo Garcia, had it in for Rob."

"He was the main witness," I said. "He obviously lied. Do you think he'd hold a grudge for twenty-six years?"

"Meaning that putting Rob away that long wasn't enough for him? Depends on how batshit crazy the man is." He pulled out a business card, turned it over, wrote something on the back, and handed it to me. "Nursing home phone number where you'll find Ricardo."

"You have that number memorized?"

"Of course. My mama's there."

## Chapter Four

The nursing home was in Jersey, a foreign land for me. Nice place, though, near an airfield where some of the nine-eleven terrorists learned to fly a plane. Other fools did too—I hate small planes and choppers. I was more familiar with the latter from Afghanistan! I didn't like Jersey either. Could never find anything there. Got lost finding that place too.

"Are you a relative?" said the receptionist, a perky young thing with a nice smile and a bad attitude like a librarian angry because you're talking too loudly.

"Do I look like one?" I said with my best gravelly tough-guy voice. I hadn't bothered to show her my shield.

She scanned me up and down as if she were a dermatologist looking for moles. Or was she just imagining me without my clothes? Maybe I had a chance with Pam Stuart? Should I start dancing salsa for the librarian? I broke down and showed my badge instead.

"I'll have to see if he's ready," she said after examining it.

"Sleeps late, does he? It's after lunch." Which I'd missed, by the way.

"No, someone has to bathe him. We're understaffed. He was in an accident and is paralyzed from the waist down."

Was news to me. Maybe not to Grasso? How could Ricardo have killed Rob?

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Ricardo didn't kill Rob, although he admitted to setting him up twenty-six years ago. Not on record, of course, so my word against his now. But he told me who did it. I only had to find her.

Rita Garcia had been wanting to get even with Rob Jackson for years. No West Side story here, although Lenny B had pitted Puerto Ricans against white guys in that one, not blacks. Rob had ruined her life, she thought, meaning he got her pregnant. I doubt he even knew it. He thought his only family was in North Carolina, after all. Seemed like a stretch that Rita'd kill Rob for that, so I figured what had happened in her life afterwards had warped her mind.

Started asking around back in the Bronx. It all had been like a multicar collision. Rob got Rita pregnant, Cousin Ricardo wanted to get back at Rob for that, and Rita's good Catholic family disowned her and put her on the street to have the baby. A tragedy all around that Rob never knew about. Rita's rage must have simmered for years, blowing up when Rob was released.

Couldn't find Rita, but someone eventually would. Wrote it up in my report, nice and tidy. Another case solved...sort of. Mentioned Ricardo's confession as well, so tallied two cases solved, although neither one was. The lieutenant could decide what to do about that; I had other cases to work on.



Justice will be served, I suppose, just a bit later than I'd like. The question still remains: Who had raped and killed that teenage girl? That was a case that I could sink my teeth into but was sure I'd never get the chance.

## **Cold Case Blues**

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#### **Preface**

Detectives hate cold cases. The good ones feel motivated to get closure for the relatives and friends of the victims. Esther Brookstone helps solved one in *Intolerance*, for example; she'd been motivated to help and the cold case wasn't even hers!

But here's Detective Castilblanco again, this time solving yet another cold case. (I'm letting the old fellow clear some.) He's one of those conscientious detectives who hates cold cases, but I should also mention some other credits: In addition to the eight novels with his partner Dao-Ming Chen, he appeared in "The Phantom Harvester," a novella also available as a free download, and in the novel *The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan*, where he has a brief cameo appearance. This novella takes place a bit after "The Phantom Harvester." He also has a major role in *Defanging the Red Dragon*, a free crossover novel also starring Esther Brookstone that counts as novel number eight.

To be honest, I don't dwell much on his failures, cold cases being among them. He doesn't either.

#### **Chapter One**

My day had started badly but got a bit better. Rolando Castilblanco's day, just another one in my life as an NYPD homicide detective. Always different, always stressful. I haven't got an ulcer yet, though. My habit of sucking on Tums helps with the acid burn.

Our kid Pedro, who was between apartments, got drunk the night before, and was in a foul mood in the morning, started that day by fighting with me. We're both stubborn SOB's. Mutual respect between us, but you know kids.

Pam had left me to fix our breakfasts. She'd departed in the wee hours to sub for a newscaster who had come down with the flu. Maybe true, maybe not. But she still had the obligation—read orders from her boss.

I arrived at work only to discover I'd forgotten about the meeting of the joint counterterrorism task force. Chen and I were honorary members, and we tried to attend when the other members remembered to invite us. I had to go downtown to the NYC FBI digs at Federal Plaza.

After that, we were called to a homicide. Some lady was caught in the crossfire of a drive-by. We figured it was gang violence, so we turned it over to the gang violence task force. (A lot of bureaucracy in NYPD, and each new mayor adds to it and rarely subtracts.) Chen spent a lot of time mothering the lady's little boy before we could get the appropriate people to take charge of the kid. Wouldn't help him much knowing mommy was just an innocent victim as he grew up. What kind of life would he have now? Dunno.

By then, I'd had it, took off early, and went to see my Buddhism mentor in Brooklyn. Never have achieved enlightenment—no way to make my cop's mind empty—but attempting it was relaxing all the same...specially to end a day like the one I'd just had!

When I arrived home, Pam still wasn't there, but Chen was.

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"I thought you might be interested in this, Rollie." Chen handed me a computer printout containing a lot of CSU forensics babble. I scanned it, assumed Chen would summarize, and glared at Pedro, who was nursing a beer.

"Did you make it to work?"

"Yeah. Just caught up on paper-pushing. Desk duty is killing me."

Pedro had a lot going on. He'd split with his partner, was looking for a new apartment, and his involvement in a shooting had put him on desk duty. Not all in one day, of course, but accumulative. The Castilblanco men were taking it on the chin.

I ignored him and told my partner, "As Dirty Harry once said, make my day." Waved the printout. "Translate this, please. No, wait! Is it good or bad news?"

"Both, I'd guess. SVU has some DNA traces that matched ones in one of your cold cases."

"Which one?"

"From before we became partners."

"That's a long time." I followed Pedro's lead and went to grab a bottle from the fridge. "Want one?" I said to her.

"No, Pedro made me tea. I'm fine."

Her thin Asian Mona Lisa smile told me that my son was more hospitable than I was. After years together, I took my partner for granted. She let me know it occasionally.

I rejoined her, took a sip, and said, "Okay. Tell me about the case."

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The problem with DNA is similar to the one with fingerprints: The evidence is useless unless you can make a match with someone in some database. Any official database. The Pentagon's and many other government and contract employees have to have security clearances now; that vetting means fingerprints are taken but often not DNA swabs. Those arrested are routinely fingerprinted too, and sometimes DNA is collected as well. That's about it. DNA testing costs money. Knowing this, I'm a bit old-fashioned: I prefer more traditional evidence. In short, you often have to catch the criminal the old-fashioned way because fingerprint or DNA records don't exist.

A police CSU saves fingerprints and DNA traces that CSIs find at a crime scene. So do the FBI, DEA, ATF (where Chen's hubby still works), and so forth. It's rare, but those same prints or DNA might show up years later at some other crime scene. That's what Chen would describe.

"The name's Rob Banks aka Bobby aka Slick Fat. SVU's holding him for attempted rape. Vic fought him off, fortunately, and will survive."

"Can I interrogate this lowlife? And where does the nickname Slick Fat come from?"

Chen shrugged. "He's short and pudgy and well-dressed? Has connections with Grasso's mob and other unsavory characters."

For historical reasons, Chen had no use for the Grasso family, even though she'd saved Papa Grasso's life once. The son was more ruthless by reputation, Kids.

But my mind was elsewhere, going back to a rape and murder investigation that had frustrated me and my partner long ago. "The Dusty Paulson case?"

"You've got it."

Dusty Paulson hadn't been a saint. She was a practicing hooker of seventeen when she was raped and murdered. We had fingerprints and DNA but couldn't pin the crime on anyone. It became one of many cold cases. A few involved me. Every cop has then.

"You didn't answer my question about interrogating the perp."

"SVU says it's okay as long as we don't prejudice their case. Also said they'd love to pin a murder charge on the bastard. He's up for a lifetime achievement award in crime, but those slick Grasso lawyers and lack of evidence only sent him upstate twice, and only for a few years. A murder conviction would put him away for a long time."

I nodded. People were innocent until proven guilty in the land of the free, unless you were #MeToo'd, which happens sometimes, especially to a few politicians. In general, outside of political vendettas settled in the court of public opinion, you'd have to have some good proof of guilt to send a criminal on a ride to prison these days.

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Nine a.m. I'm here to tell you that."

I'd just seen her at that counterterrorism meeting. She must have returned to the office.

"Okay, I'll meet you there. Which precinct?"

Grasso's, of course. Posh cop digs in mobster land. Always looking to nab Grasso, of course, but they had a lot of other crimes there too. We all did, more than enough to keep us busy.

I saw Chen out, gave another glare to Pedro, and went to bed. Sometime later, I felt my sweet Pam crawl in beside me. She'd just showered. Did that when she had a bad day. Washed away the troubles, I guess.

## Chapter Two

Ceci made an appearance the next morning, looking for breakfast. I still had the fixings for some pancakes. She liked a fried egg on top of the stack. To each his own. Maybe she fancied the mix of egg yolk and syrup. I never asked.

She dropped in occasionally, this time more to comfort Pedro. She could do that better than we could now. They were close and nearly the same age—the older they became, the less the age difference mattered. To them, we were just old mom and pops who didn't even know what musical groups were popular.

Their relationship took a hit with that case of the phantom harvester though. (Was that the media's name for the bastard? I couldn't remember.) She was the CSI; he was the detective. It was a complicated case. We were still trying to figure out who the mysterious Raven was, but they nabbed the principal offender. Done deal, but my kids' first real experience with how sick and violent some criminals are.

"Pops, where are you off to?"

"A little thing called work. I suggest you two do the same. Leave some breakfast treats for your mother. I'd like to be here to cuddle, but she deserves to sleep. She had a rough day yesterday."

"You did too," Pedro said. "You told me while you were cooking. No wonder the bacon was super-crisp."

"Not true. I like it that way. I just wanted to show what you're missing. Sometimes desk duty gives you a brief respite from chaos. Enjoy it."

Ceci put down her mug. "I'll ride with you."

"Only part way. I'll jump on another train. I'm meeting Chen at a different precinct."

We split at New Jersey's Penn Station, not New York's. She'd catch the train for Hoboken and then the ferry; I'd stay on the same train to New York's Penn Station and then continue on the subway. The kids had inherited my predilection for public transportation. Sometimes Pam drove, especially when she had to go in early to the Columbus Circle studios, like yesterday.

At the competitive precinct's SVU, Chen and I met Lieutenant Drake and Sergeant O'Reilly; Drake was a female cop I knew back when she was a sergeant and had looked better then—age affects everyone differently; and O'Reilly was an overweight fellow who might play Santa Claus for the kids at Christmas, his rosy cheeks, red-veined nose, and paunch reminding me of how that jolly old elf might look if he shaved off his beard.

"Uniform is escorting Rob Banks to interrogation #3 as we speak," Drake said. O'Reilly nodded. "How do you want to do this?"

Chen handled interrogations well. I let her take charge of grilling Banks with O'Reilly—always good to have more muscle available in an interrogation. I knew Chen could defend herself, but I didn't know about Drake. O'Reilly would make two of her; she was petite—maybe barely over five feet. She looked small even next to Chen, but I thought she might be the brains of the SUV's pair.

Drake and I would watch from behind the one-way mirror.

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"Who the hell are you?" Banks said to Chen. "I don't want to talk to no Chinese bitch." He glared at O'Reilly. "Get her out of here. She probably wants to give me Covid!"

"Did he get hit on the head?" I said to Drake. "That pandemic was controlled a while ago."

"He's still somewhat affected by the drugs he's taken. You should have seen him when we collared him."

I nodded and continued to watch the interrogation.

"I'm afraid you're stuck with me, Mr. Banks," Chen said. "We have a cold case where you're our prime suspect now. Do you remember Dusty Paulson?"

"Don't remember no Dusty. I just run a bar. Don't even know why I'm here."

Rob Banks really did own a bar. Grasso had given him a no-interest loan to buy it. In return, it was a safe place for the mob boss to have secret meetings with his henchmen. We suspected that wasn't the only service Banks provided either.

"We read you your rights, Rob, and told you about the charges you'll be facing. We might now be adding additional ones." O'Reilly winked at Chen and then turned back to Banks.

"And that history began with Dusty," Chen said. She put her hands flat on the table, pushed herself up, and then leaned forward to get in Banks's face. "Your DNA in the current case

matches that found at a crime scene in our cold case. I want a confession for both crimes. Do you understand that, Mr. Banks?"

I was afraid Banks would hit Chen. He managed to control his temper, though. And he was thinking, maybe wondering what other proof Chen had on him? I would be. Also wondering why Chen hadn't told him to begin with? She'd saved the worst for last: A murder charge,

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Chen sat back down but continued to glare at Banks. Gone was the sweet woman with her tight-lipped, enigmatic smile that had made me call her my Asian Mona Lisa. I knew she could be lethal and had no use for rapists or murderers, and Banks was probably both. She had feared Grasso senior a bit but not the son, and she didn't fear Banks.

Chen and O'Reilly waited. Part of the art of interrogation is to wait and let the perp stew in his own juices. Banks was now sweating.

"Got my DNA, you say?" Chen and O'Reilly nodded. "What happened to this Dusty?"

Boom! Chen struck like a rattlesnake. "You murdered her!" She rattled off the date.

O'Reilly was playing the good cop. "You can get some positive points by confessing, Mr. Banks. Maybe change life in prison without parole to less time and the possibility of parole? I can talk to the DA to help you out."

"Can he do that?" I said to Drake.

"We can talk to the DA. Doesn't mean we'll push for a lighter sentence very hard."

Banks seemed like a helium balloon that had deflated. "I honestly don't remember any Dusty. Mr. Grasso won't like this."

Chen struck again., "What do you mean? Can you give us dirt on Grasso?"

I twitched. Was Chen going to make a deal to get Grasso? The son might be worse than the father, but he was more stupid. We'd eventually get him. I didn't want to make a deal with Banks. Drake patted me on the shoulder to calm me down.

I didn't think the SOB had anything good on Grasso, but he apparently thought it was good enough to worry about the mobster or his hired thugs coming after him. Hell, I just wanted to close the cold case. Grasso was slippery and got out of more jams than I can count. Sure, he might off Banks for talking too much. He could off his daughter's boyfriend for kissing her on the cheek. Rumors had it he'd threatened more than one.

"Suppose I do, and I sing to you? I need to see what that gets me."

Damn! The guy's a poet. I almost laughed.

I relaxed when O'Reilly said, "Not much more than what I offered earlier except for some protection from Grasso."

"I'm not admitting I murdered this Dusty, though. Didn't do it. I was in a cell in Miami on that day. You can confirm that."

I twitched again. So close! But Banks's DNA was at my crime scene. That was a clue we had to pursue.

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Three of us debated what to do outside the interrogation room.

"Your call, Castilblanco," Drake said. "There's the match, and there's Miami. O'Reilly's confirming the latter, but I suspect it's true. Still want to add the murder charge?"

I shrugged. "Whoever might be covering for him, who knows how a judge or jury would handle that contradiction? Let's get the dirt on Grasso and leave this pending. Somehow his DNA was found with Dusty."

Drake nodded. "That's prudent. We can always add the murder charge later."

"Our problem is," said Chen, "if not Rob Banks, who killed Dusty? We went from one to zero suspects."

"Just go back in and keep him focused on Grasso," I told her. "Got a canteen here?" I said to Drake.

"Second floor. I'll meet you there. I have to wait for O'Reilly." She smiled at Chen. "I think you two can shake down Mr. Banks alone."

Chen smiled back, her thin-lipped smile being all Drake would get...and that was good. She was damn scary when angry.

Drake treated me. "How'd you two get together?"

"You might remember a dirty-bomb threat back in 2014. That was only part of a complex case. Another part of it was a plot to kill the president. Chen had a murder; I had one and was working alone at the time. We discovered they were related, so the boss partnered us. The rest is history. What about you and O'Reilly. You two seem like oil and water."

"Bill's just a lovable old bear, but he has claws. He saved my butt a couple of times, so it seemed natural to team up. He's good with victims, maybe better than I am."

I found that interesting. What partnerships worked and what ones didn't seem to be unpredictable.

"You were unmarried when I first met you. I noticed the wedding ring. Congrats."

"My husband's a pediatrician. Handy to have him around with the kids. And for other things too."

"Like making kids." She blushed. Would she consider that sexual harassment? Different times now. I always had to be careful and not be the typical Latino flirt. Hard to do. Part of my culture. Italian men have that problem too. Just ask one ex-governor who got #MeToo'd!

"Do you and Pam have kids? I see her on TV sometimes. She's aging well."

"A lot better than I am. We took in one of my cousin's kids when she died of cancer. Fostered at first, and then we adopted Ceci and Pedro. You might have seen them around. She's a CSI and he's a detective, both with NYPD."

"Haven't had the pleasure of meeting them. I would have recognized the name Castilblanco and wondered."

We discussed our cases some more, their current one and our cold one, and then Chen and O'Reilly showed up. He was smiling; she was inscrutable.

"So...what happened?" Drake said.

O'Reilly nodded at Chen. "He gave us something," Chen said. "He's into drugs and uses one of Grasso's networks as a supplier. We might close that down, but I doubt it will affect Grasso at all."

I nodded. "Let's turn that over to the narcos. Let them run with it if they want."

"And we'll go ahead with the rape charge," said O'Reilly. Drake nodded.

We'd accomplished something that morning, just not as much as I'd wanted.

## Chapter Three

Back at our own precinct, Chen and I butted heads a bit about how to proceed. Banks had been in that Miami jail cell the day Dusty was killed. That meant either he had been at the crime scene earlier or someone had tried to frame him. I don't like Southern deputies much, but I didn't expect this one to be lying.

So...I took the first possibility and Chen took the second. I told her, though, that the only person who might want to frame Banks was Grasso senior. She countered that by stating that it could be anyone Banks had pissed off, so she had to ascertain who Banks's enemies were back then.

I started on my task by looking over the case notes that I'd written so long ago. Printed them out so I wouldn't have to look at them on the screen—my reading glasses didn't do a good job for computer work.

Back then, we had no idea about whose DNA we had, so my partner at the time and I had never checked who owned that old West Side warehouse down by the docks. In hindsight, we should have thought about the mob because of its location. We were homicide detectives, after all—the boxes and cartons in that warehouse hadn't been our business, and we'd probably would have needed a warrant to start opening them. A patrolman on his rounds had shone a flashlight beam inside the warehouse and spotted Dusty's body next to a forklift.

Turned out that Grasso senior's accountant at the time owned the warehouse, just another way of saying Grasso owned it. Saving that for later investigation, I looked for what Rob Banks was doing for Grasso at the time.

He didn't own the bar back then, but he was a liquor salesman who took orders from restaurants and bars and made sure they were delivered. I thought a moment about that. Maybe he also took orders for other stuff? Tooling around NYC boroughs as a liquor salesman would have been ideal for drug distribution. Had Banks supplied dealers from Grasso's network?

That could have led to a lot of temptation, not only giving him a drug habit but also access to a lot of money. If he'd skimmed drugs, couldn't he have skimmed some money off the top too? If that warehouse had been used for storing both drugs and liquor—hell, maybe the liquor was illicit too in the sense that no duties had been paid—Banks might have been in that warehouse many times. And the accountant might have discovered Banks's skimming and used that to frame Banks.

A theory doesn't make a solid case. All I really had were conjectures. And still an unresolved question: Why had Dusty even been there? My partner and I had never answered that question, but I was wondering now if the young hooker hadn't been addicted to drugs and gone to the warehouse to beg someone for them. There had been no traces of drugs in the ME's tox report, which I trusted because it had been prepared by my longtime ME friend, Big Tiny. But, if she were desperate, there'd be no drugs in her system, just the mental anguish.

The lack of needle marks meant nothing. She might have been using uppers or some other pills. Grasso wouldn't just be distributing injectable stuff. He'd have run a complete pharmacy that would include everything from controlled substances for junkies to steroids and human growth hormones for athletes. Even amateurs used the latter.

That led me to check Dusty's medical records, which the case file also contained. Some john had beat the crap out of her once, and she'd been prescribed painkillers, oxycodone to be specific. Ceci and Pedro's most serious case had involved that "phantom harvester," a doctor who had several side businesses; one was writing lots of prescriptions for oxycodone. Dusty probably became addicted to it long before its use became a national pandemic that killed almost as many people as Covid.

Theories, conjectures, and questions—I hate cold cases. But I had a suspect who might have wanted to frame Banks: The accountant. He could have killed Dusty precisely for that purpose, knowing that Banks's DNA would be all over that warehouse.

I went to find Chen.

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Dao-Ming had trotted off to one of our conference rooms to get away from me. When intense mental concentration's required, she likes to go off and find somewhere quiet to think. She does that better than I do. The precinct's windows and walls still let outside noise in, but it became just muted and random background noise and not my mumbling and cajoling.

She'd independently come to a similar conclusions, though. We had to find that damn accountant.

I don't know what an MBA prepares you for. Harry Ricci didn't have one from Harvard, but he did from IU that also used the same kind of tutorial system based on case studies. I doubted that any of those had anything to do with running a mob, though. Ricci also was a CPA, of course, in addition to the MBA. I supposed that might be common enough, probably more common than an MBA.

He was still alive and well, a resident of a senior living community in New Jersey. We got an unmarked car from the pool and drove out Route 3 and then downstate using the Garden State Parkway. Guess Ricci had enough money to buy into that community; the entry fee cost more than our home in Clifton. I'd checked the community out on their website before leaving.

"We have an appointment with Mr. Harry Ricci, one of your residents," I said to the guard at the entrance to the complex, leaning out the window to do so while showing my badge.

"Let me check, officer." Fellow showed some respect. Maybe ex-cop or ex-military? He called somewhere and then returned. "You can park at Town Center in a visitor's space. It's all the way to the rear of the property. There'll be a sign. Mr. Ricci will be waiting in the lobby."

"Good security," Chen said as we drove along the entrance road after leaving the kiosk. "I should suggest this place for my parents."

Her parents certainly had the money. "Jersey isn't Long Island, and they might have to contend with some Tony Soprano types if they want to avoid Grasso surrogates," I said with a laugh, remembering that old series. I'd only caught a few episodes. Both the island and Jersey had a history with mobs. Hell, the city did too. Grasso was everywhere but New Jersey, but he had dealings in Elizabeth

"Or their accountants." She said that with a straight face.

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Harry Ricci didn't look like I'd expected him to look. He wasn't old and feeble. Some residents of that senior living center were using walkers or wheelchairs, but the seventy-seven-year-old Italian didn't seem at all feeble. I supposed there was a wide range of health conditions to be found among the residents in such a place that advertised itself as "your new home for the rest of your life." You went in and progressed from independent living to assisted living and then nursing home, a one-stop community of people waiting for the final peace of death. They even had church services. I didn't see any Buddhist ones offered, though.



Ricci was a tall, lanky man who was dressed semi-formally in a white shirt with bow tie, pleated slacks, and suede shoes. He had a goatee and glasses that made him look like a Nazi bureaucrat—maybe Himmler?—not an Italian look at all.

We shook hands—his was cold and clammy—and then took seats around a small table just off a bar area. Some old women at the bar eyed us, more Chen, though. Looked like they were just having coffee. I could use some but figured there'd be no service except at the bar.

"What can I do for you detectives?"

The voice was soft and educated, with a bit of Midwestern edge to it. Could this man be Dusty's murderer? During my many years as a cop, I knew just about anyone could commit murder, given the right circumstances. Because Ricci had worked for Grasso, he probably knew a thing or two about how to do it properly.

Again, I let Chen do the talking. I could see she fascinated Ricci, and I wanted to watch his body language. Of course, she'd do that too, and we'd compare notes afterward.

"We are following up on a cold case. Dusty Paulson was killed in your warehouse years ago."

He nodded. "A tragic occurrence. They never caught her killer. I had a solid alibi: My first daughter was being born."

"Our records are a bit incomplete. Could you explain what that warehouse was used for?"

"Of course. We were using it to store merchandise we'd later distribute. It was near the docks, so it was convenient for that purpose."

"Could you be more specific? What type of merchandise?"

"No. That was too many years ago, detective, and my memory isn't what it used to be."

"And yet you remembered that Dusty was killed there," I said, deciding I'd be the bad cop. "That's selective memory and a bit suspicious, Mr. Ricci."

He glared at me but nodded. Those damn coke-bottle Nazi-style eyeglasses magnified the piercing eyes behind that glare. Yes, definitely Himmler-like. The Hitler and his Nazis had been just another mafia, like Putin and his oligarchs were now.

"I can't control it. Some people take OTC drugs to try. They're not any better than placebos."

"About that alibi," Chen said. "You said that you'd have to come into the precinct later because of a family emergency. Was your daughter's birth an emergency rather than a blessed event?"

"I went in later, and I assume the able personnel at NYPD checked the details of my statement after that," Ricci said, winking at me now.

The old man probably remembered I'd been the lead officer. So much for memory losses. Was he amused by all this?

"Do you know someone named Banks?" I said.

"Never heard of him."

"Didn't say Banks was male. So, you did know him. Rob Banks?"

Ricci apparently hadn't liked my little trap.

"I neither know or knew Rob Banks or Dusty Paulson. If Mr. Banks is Ms. Paulson's killer, please arrest him and close your case."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I said. "You planned it that way. You planned to frame him. You knew his DNA would be all over that warehouse. You just didn't expect it would take so long for that frame to work."

Ricci stood. "I think we're done here."

Chen and I were still sitting.

"One last question," I said. For some reason, Columbo came to mind. Didn't have my old and soiled raincoat that day, though. "Does Grasso's son visit you here? Just to talk about the good old times you and his father had?"

Ricci turned and walked away, heading for an elevator.

"He's guilty as hell," Chen said. "But how will we prove it?"

I held up a finger and trotted after Ricci. He was walking slowly, so I managed to block the elevator.

"Just one more thing, sir," I said. "We're going to interrogate Grasso next. I'll tell him how cooperative you've been. No details, of course."

Ricci blanched but retained his cool demeanor.

"You do that, detective. I don't know Grasso's son."

"I hear that he's more ruthless than his old man."

"Good day, detective."

I told Chen what I'd said to Ricci when we were back in the car.

"Why did you do that?"

"To make him sweat a bit. He's probably getting on the phone right now to tell Grasso what a good boy he's been about not saying anything, and that we're coming for a visit. We can check phone records to prove he still has connections with the mob."

"And what will that prove?"

"That I'm right. Ricci had Dusty killed to frame Banks. Rob Banks didn't kill Dusty Paulson, Ricci did. And just maybe he was following old man Grasso's orders. Both old knew how to keep employees in line."

## Chapter Four

We did visit Grasso—I don't make idle threats. The son still lived in the old family home, the stately center of a compound that could have belonged to a Wall Street banker. It seemed odd to meet him in the fancy study/library where we had met with the father several times. On its bookshelves, there were many first editions, just family investments. I'm sure the son in particular had never bothered to read those leather-bound tomes.

"So, Rob killed that whore Dusty?" he said after I explained the reason for our visit. "What do I care?"

"You're not afraid he'll rat about the family's business ventures?"

Chen had been silent. She was eyeing the little camera in the corner of a top shelf, the little blinking red light announcing that our visit was being recorded. Grasso had probably watched us as we waited for his excellency to appear, call it fashionably late. I knew she wanted me to take the lead on this one. She hadn't liked the father, and probably hated what the son represented even more.

"Rob has all he can do running our bar. He now knows nothing about our other ventures."

I doubted that was true and noted that he considered the bar his business too.

"I said we're holding him because the DNA found at that warehouse long ago matches traces from a current rape scene where we know he committed the crime, but not the first, because he was in a Miami jail cell when the first occurred. I didn't say he killed Dusty. You assumed that. Why?"

Grasso put his hands on his knees and stared at me. If looks could kill...but he was thinking.

"My mistake. Rob likes doing it rough with women. I knew he'd eventually get into trouble for that."

"What about your father's old accountant, Harry Ricci?"

"What about him? He's a good Catholic—" Chen stifled a cough. "—raised some nice kids and retired comfortably. The American Dream, detective. I know Ricci well. You can't be thinking he killed Dusty?"

"He said he didn't know you, only your old man."

"My father told me all about Harry when I took over the reins of our businesses. That's how I knew him."

"And what did old Grasso tell you? Maybe that Ricci killed Dusty to frame Rob? Why not just kill him for his indiscretion?"

"What indiscretion? Rob's been a loyal employee. I gave the man a bar to run as a reward. I trusted him. If he raped and killed Dusty and raped another woman, I sure didn't order that."

"So, you didn't know he was skimming when he was delivering drugs to your old man's network as a liquor salesman?"

"You don't know that either, Detective Castilblanco. You're guessing."

He was right, of course. "And you won't confirm my guess? What do you have to lose?"

Grasso's answer to that question depended on whether he'd sacrifice Harry to keep Rob, because a yes answer implied Ricci was probably guilty. A no answer merely meant he was willing to throw Rob to the wolves to back Ricci, or his father, if the old man had ordered Ricci to frame Rob.

It was a complex chess move that the young Grasso had to make. But he surprised me, almost as if he were a mind reader. "Stalemate," he said. "We're through here, detectives." He gave a little head bow toward Chen. "Happy to meet you, Dao-Ming. My father always spoke so highly of you."

Chen shuddered as he left the room. She probably regretted saving the old man's life, especially after he'd put out a contract on her. She didn't smile.

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During the car ride back to the precinct, we discussed where we were at with respect to the cold case.

We'd been trying to get the goods on Grasso's son for years, and we had completely failed with Grasso senior. I hadn't expected any luck with the son this time. But that wouldn't have solved my cold case anyway, unless Grasso senior had ordered Dusty's murder to frame Rob. Nothing like besmirching an old mobster's name to cheer me up!

Chen suggested that maybe Rob had ordered the murder before he'd gone to Florida, or even from his jail cell in Miami. I asked her to follow up on that idea. Seemed like a good one, although it would just add to the complexity of the case if true. Complex cases didn't bother me, though, just ones I couldn't solve, like Dusty's murder.

The other idea I wanted to pursue was whether Dusty's TOD could have been earlier. I called Big Tiny.

"Good to hear you, Rollie," my ME friend said.

Filling the little screen of my desk phone, he still looked like a graying version of that old defensive nose tackle the Pats once had long before Brady left for Tampa Bay, pissing off all the Pats' fans in New England and elsewhere. For those rabid fans, GOAT had a double meaning. The ME had a gentle voice, though.

"What's up, bro?"

"Dusty Paulson," I said to the little screen.

There was a moment of silence. Trying to remember? "Long ago and far away in time and space. Not my professional turf now. What about Miss Dusty?"

"We now have a DNA match to those traces for a lowlife named Rob Banks. Only problem is that he was in a Miami jail cell when you said the murder occurred."

"Sounds like a solid alibi."

"It is, unless your TOD is wrong. Could Dusty have been killed earlier?"

"How much error is required?"

"Fourteen hours maybe."

Big Tiny shook his head, an action that set the pixels on the desk phone's image dancing. "Sometimes the error bars are wide, that width determined by the time since death and climatological conditions at the crime scene, but never that wide when I arrive soon at that scene. Sorry, bro."

After that bomb, the next thing to tackle was Ricci's alibi. I called Bellevue. Luckily, I had a contact there, an ER doctor. Colin Murphy's sister had been murdered and he had almost been a murder victim twice himself. Chen got those two cases, and they related to one of mine, so we became partners to solve all of them...and take care of a few other ancillary conspiracies along the way. Murphy and Chen had a relationship for a while afterward that eventually fizzled. She had had many relationship issues before she met her husband.

"Hi there, Rollie. Good to hear from you and know you're still around keeping our city safe. How's Dao-Ming?"

Irked me a bit that Colin didn't ask about me. "She's married and has a kid."

"Doesn't sound like she's available then. I'll just have to keep on being the fun-loving bachelor that I am."

"Or, you'd have to deal with her husband. Not suggesting that, by the way. This isn't a social call. I have a little problem. I could get a warrant, but an old friend might want to do me a favor."

"Namely me, I'm guessing. Okay, what's the favor?"

"I want to confirm when a child was born." I gave him the name of Ricci's kid and the DOB. He didn't need to know about Dusty's TOD; I'd make that comparison myself.

"Okay. I'll check. I'll get back to you."

"Don't get into any trouble."

"Don't worry. This place is so busy, no one will ever know. It's public record too, found in most local newspapers' archives. Not a big deal. You still owe me a beer for the favor. We should get together some time. I don't have much time left here."

"You can't be retiring!"

"Not a chance. I'm doing a tour with Doctors Without Borders. Did that with Putin's war against Ukraine and found it rewarding."

Dr. Colin Murphy was a good guy, and he was my last hope to find Dusty's murderer unless Chen came up with something.

## Chapter Five

Pam and I weren't yet married when Chen first started dating Colin Murphy, but my wife got after me that evening about asking him for a favor.

"He couldn't very well turn you down because of Dao-Ming. That's unfair to him, Rollie. He's a nice man. What if he gets into trouble?"

I shrugged. "He said there wouldn't be any problem. I took him at his word. I'm desperate to close this case, *querida*. The sooner, the better."

"I understand that, but no damn case is worth getting an innocent friend into trouble."

I noticed her use of "innocent." And have I stated that Pam was often my external conscience when the internal one took a holiday? Maybe Chen hadn't been too committed to old Colin? Pam often knew things about my partner that I didn't. Never had quite understood the reason for the breakup. I mulled over my wife's words some more.

"You're right. I'll tell the good doctor to forget about the favor. I'll get the damn warrant." I grabbed my smart phone. "Okay?"

She smiled.

"Are you at home?" I asked Colin when he answered.

"Yeah. Work starts at ten p.m. for me today. The graveyard shift, our busiest one. Knifings, gun shots, you name it. But got what you wanted."

He told me when Ricci's kid was born, six hours before Dusty was murdered. That shot Ricci's alibi to hell, but could that old bastard have juxta-positioned a blessed event and a murderous one? And how had I missed that? He could have left Bellevue and met Dusty at the warehouse, which was essentially straight across town, not far from where Colin had fought to survive in the Hudson's waters after being shot.

Figured out how I'd missed that after a bit more thought. Fred Bautista, my partner at the time, and I hadn't checked when the daughter was actually born. We'd screwed up!

"No you don't!" Pam said as I started to head out the door. "I made lasagna."

Pedro laughed at me. "Better stay, Pops. You love Mom's lasagna."

I gave in out of self-interest. Suspected there was an Italian in her family tree. Her recipe produced a Venetian-style lasagna with a crusty top layer that could make me go weak at the knees. I often avoided lasagna when eating out in Little Italy, hers was so good.

"Okay. I'll deal with the accountant in the morning. Let me call Chen, though. I know what we have to do now, and I don't want her to waste time on a wild goose chase."

"Dinner in five," Pam said. "If you're not sitting down by then, Pedrito gets your portion."

"Yes!" Pedro said, fist-bumping air.

Damned if I'd let him get my fav Italian meal!

We had a pleasant dinner after I'd rushed through the good news with Chen. Pedro was in a good mood even though he didn't get my slice of lasagna. He'd be off desk duty at work the next day. I winked at Pam as he wolfed down her lasagna. Maybe love for Italian food in his bloodline too, even though he wasn't direct lineage? We only lacked Ceci to have the whole family together again.

I was glad Pam had made me stick around.

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The next morning, Chen and I headed back to that Jersey senior living center to see Ricci. We'd arranged to meet some state police at the senior living center's gate. Their state, they could make the arrest, if that was required. Ricci was at the tennis courts, so we decided to interrupt his game. Thought he might like that.

He must have been losing because he wasted no time in taking off. Ran right past the troopers—I hope I can run that fast when I'm his age—hopped in his car—I assumed it was his out of the many parked in the huge lot—and took off.

I handed the plate number to one of the troopers.

"Already snapped the pic with my phone."

"Should we assume that's an admission of guilt?" said the other trooper.

"Damn right!" I said.

Chen just smiled her enigmatic smile.

We later learned that they found Ricci in his car with a bullet in his head at a rest stop on the parkway. He'd either been heading out of state via some devious route or was crossing over to Atlantic City where he'd thought Grasso's connections would help him.

"I think it's the son ensuring Ricci's silence," Chen said. "Can't besmirch Daddy's name, you know."

Interesting theory, I thought. "And we didn't have that much on him except for the broken alibi and other coincidental facts." I smiled at her. "One cold case solved, though, as far as I'm concerned."

## Dreams of Revenge

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#### Preface

This story that takes place a bit earlier than the previous one, after Detective Castilblanco and his wife Pam Stuart move to Clifton, NJ, because they needed more room for their family that went from two to four when they adopted Cecilia and Pedro. (This originally was a free stand-alone PDF download, but it's now here in order to bracket the novels with the three stories.)

The story illustrates another danger cops face almost anywhere: Someone they put in prison or their relatives can come after them. It represents another argument against excessive bail reform. Some lowlifes need to be in jail!

#### Chapter One

When I walked out to the foyer in my pajamas and slippers to retrieve the NY Times, my wife Pam was standing facing the entrance door of our house, not holding onto all the news fit to print but a sheet of paper. If not for her trembling hand, I would have guessed she was jerking my chains with that stupid manikin craze so prevalent years ago.

"You OK, *mariposita*?"

She was usually in the kitchen preparing breakfast for us. That meal had improved a lot since we adopted my cousin's two kids—I like Cap'n Crunch and Froot Loops too!

"Huh? Yeah. Well, no. Look at this." She handed me the sheet of paper, her hand still trembling.

Most cops have seen similar notes—print characters from old magazines cut out and pasted onto a page to form a threatening message. Notes like these are clichés in crime fiction, especially for serial killers and kidnappers. Thought maybe emails were more common now, though. Or text messages, Twitter and Facebook threats, whatever.

This message read, "Detective Rolando Castilblanco: I know where you live. I'm coming for you. But first I'll kill your lovely TV wife and children. There's nothing you can do to stop me." That was it—a major threat to my family and me. Or a prank?

Pam handed me a blank envelope. "Wasn't even sealed. Someone shoved it through our mail slot last night. I suppose I should have thought of fingerprints."

I held the note's corner in two fingers with my left hand, same for the envelope in my right. "If there are prints, we can isolate them by comparing and excluding yours," I said. "Don't worry about it."

She'd answered my question, though, the one that was going to be, "Did it come in an envelope?" After years of marriage, you begin to do that. Saw it even with my partner, Dao-Ming Chen, and her marriage to hubby Eric Kulmala was much more recent.

There are more than 35,000 cops in the NYPD now and many are married. Man or woman, the spouse is often not a cop. Yet Pam was close to being one. She worked as a TV reporter and saw as much or more of the rotten part of the Big Apple as I did. Domestic disputes,

porn rings, drug addiction and its associated violence, gang fights, rapes—she covered them all. Political scandals too. My partner and I just covered homicides. In spite of the mayor's and chief's chest pounding about reductions in crime, there were enough crimes in New York City to keep us busy.

Married cops everywhere often can't afford to live in the city where they work, even when cop and spouse are both working. Same goes for firefighters, EMTs, and other people, first-responders who provide essential services to a community. This is a national problem, and tight-assed bureaucrats who make rules that the service providers have to live in the community don't help with finding a solution. Guess the idea of someone being paid by a community and not paying local taxes there made them that way.

But we lived in Clifton, New Jersey for other reasons. We'd joined Brooklyn's diaspora to the burbs shortly after we adopted Ceci and Pedrito. We were living the "American dream"—house in the burbs with a small yard, 2.5 children without the half-kid, worried about paying taxes and trying to save for the kids' education—the whole nine yards. Our house is just twelve miles outside the Lincoln Tunnel and only a few blocks from a dear friend I'd known since I'd been stationed in South Korea preparing for an incursion into the North—SEALs do such things on the sly and mostly undercover because the politicians like deniability. Prep for these ops always come with the reminder that the government can't help you if you're caught. Always thought such ops were more dangerous than being a cop. Studying the letter changed that perception a bit.

"Let me handle this," I said.

"Shouldn't we call the Clifton police?"

"We can do that. Sure. But I'm guessing this is some perp I sent upstate." "Upstate" was relative to my precinct in Manhattan, so upstate New York. "That's a lot of people to consider, but it's a finite set, and I can make it smaller by seeing who's been released recently."

"He could direct his revenge plan from a jail cell, you know."

Always said Pam's smarter than I am. Dao-Ming too. My brain trust.

"OK, I'll consider them all, but what I said can be the first pass. The way the letter is worded, though, it's about me." Waved the letter by the corner. "Let me dictate this to you so you can write it all down. I want the exact wording before we turn it over to forensics. We'll then call the local cops."

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Clifton cop Ricky Velasquez was almost a neighbor, but I hadn't seen him in years. We'd trained together in the academy long ago. We'd have just a few telephone conversations now and then while I'd been living in Brooklyn and never too happy about traveling outside the five boroughs. I still went into Brooklyn for my enlightenment sessions with my Buddhist guru.

I'd called Chen at her apartment, said I was going to be late, and explained why. Was already at my laptop sifting through case files. Nothing finalized there—trials often occur months or years later—but I could get somewhere by correlating my case notes with recent prison releases. Pam had a valid point, so my actions would be followed by considering other cases too, as well as databases we had access to at the precinct.

Didn't mind Ricky's interruption, though, because I hate computer work.

"Hell of a way to socialize, neighbor," Velasquez said gripping my hand.



He'd been NYPD too, but his move to the burbs was accompanied by changing police departments. The commute to the city can be bad even from Clifton. I knew that now. Should have consulted with him.

Knew he'd be sympathetic to my dilemma. His dark and curly hair now had some frost at the temples. His eyes were permanently squinted like a fisherman's from looking at the sea's horizon. Had put on some weight too—haven't we all? He was like a fullback; I was more a halfback. Not that we'd ever played. Chen was the athlete in my circles, but we all tried to keep in shape.

We were both all business, so we went right at it after bro-cop embraces and slaps on the back. Told him what I'd started to do.

"Sounds good and definitely one possibility," he said. "Probably every perp you put away would like to make stew meat out of you. But why the family?"

I shrugged. "Make me suffer more?"

Ricky thought a moment. "Maybe the perp thinks you wronged his family somehow? Any collateral damage in a violent arrest in your past?"

"I'm refreshing my memory with my case notes."

"You might not have been aware of it. And a perp you collared could want to make you suffer just for the hell of it. My immediate concern lies with your kids. Are they in school?"

"Public school until they get to high school age. We'll have to figure out what to do then. I'm for the city high school, but Pam wants to go private."

"Arguments for both, but the private can cost more than college. We won't be able to afford it." He shrugged. "I'm just asking for security reasons. Pam or you pick them up?"

"A friend takes Pedrito to childcare and Ceci to pre-kinder and picks them up, and then entertains them until one of us can drop by. Jin-Kyong is trustworthy and knows kids. Has her own. Her husband was also a SEAL."

Chen also paid for childcare for her little one because husband Eric, a DEA agent, was often on assignment. Pam and I had Jin-Kyong handling all the logistics. We paid her too, probably more, because we covered gas and food too, in addition to the childcare.

We were all better off than most modern parents holding down two or more jobs and paying for childcare. The chunk taken out of our overall budget wasn't that big, but it still affected finances. Couldn't imagine how a single parent managed. Not everyone lives near enough to grandparents who are still able to manage young, energetic kids. It was a complex national problem. I had no idea how to solve it. I was sure the politicians didn't either, or didn't want to.

"Was?"

"Long story. Once a good friend. His homicide was one of my cases years ago."

"I'd tell Jin-Kyong about the threat and ask her if she would mind some protection going and coming with the kids."

"What about at her house afterwards?"

"That's harder to swing. We've been hit by budget cuts. I'll see what I can do. Can you arrange for NYPD protection for Pam?"

"Same problem, but I'll try to do something without her knowing it. She might think it would cramp her style on the news beat."

Velasquez nodded. "I have one of those spouses too. Nurse at Mountainside. We have a neighbor lady who babysits our kids after school, although they're a bit older than yours. You're going to need to be around more for school activities, visits to malls, movies, and the like."

“You’re thinking this is for real?”

“If it’s a practical joke, it’s a bad one. We have to assume it’s real. We need a second plan to find out who this jerk is and go after him.”

“I’m open to ideas.”

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Velasquez and his fellow cops did what they could. So did Chen when she heard—she liked computers, so she was the natural one to peruse our databases for leads.

Jin-Kyong took the news well but worried. Because her husband had been Caucasian, there was the possibility that the perp would confuse her kids with ours, so her worries were multiplied. I talked to her about how to check out her surroundings and look for potential threats. Pam already knew about that from a case’s aftermath where we thought a cartel might be after us.

It was hard to be proactive when I was in defensive mode, but, between Chen and me, we eliminated almost all the perps I’d put away if we assumed they had to be free to carry out their threat. I worked homicide cases, after all, so the sentences tended to be long, even if some DA engineered a plea deal (happens all too often). The five who’d been released turned out to be old men—three were already dead and two were patients in nursing homes. That left the ones inside who might be using an outside accomplice to carry out their revenge. That was a lot of people!

The second note appeared in Ceci’s backpack. Pam went ballistic. Couldn’t blame her. That backpack went everywhere with our daughter. Someone could slip the envelope into it in almost any public place. This envelope was sealed. Pam watched me take it out with rubber gloves.

The message said, “This proves I can get to your kids.” That was it, but it was enough to make Pam into a she-bear ready to charge the person threatening her cubs.

Forensics had better luck this time, though: DNA from the perp licking the envelope and a few partial fingerprints. The IAFIS search came up negative, but the CODIS search was interesting—the lick of that envelope had to be a blood relative of Paolo Laurenzi. That old Italian mobster had worked as an aide/butler for a porn producer who financed part of his business with stolen art. The porn-meister had escaped us, but Laurenzi was convicted of murdering a person involved in the case and sent to prison where he had died. Chen and I were convinced that he wasn’t guilty, but everyone else thought otherwise. Judge and jury were all that counted, of course.

Clearly Laurenzi wasn’t directing the revenge plot, but some blood relation was. How many living blood relatives did the old bastard have? Daughters and sons went to the top of my list, but it was possible someone else was controlling the situation.

Paolo’s old mob boss, Julio Grasso, was still around. He was an old acquaintance of Chen’s. We decided to visit him in his mansion.

## Chapter Two

“Such a pleasure to see you again,” said Grasso, after making us wait for almost half an hour.

We were sitting in his European-style rich man's study when the old white-haired lion strolled in. He nodded to Chen and then to me. Chen received a smile in addition. She'd saved his butt once; he had put a contract on her another time. Old sparring partners with me as unwilling referee and not well liked by the old capo.

I told him why I was there. He smiled, listened, and ignored me, focusing on Chen. Even after having a kid, she still looked like a retired runway model in her black power suit with its red belt and matching boots. A slim body, but not so slim now, and long legs gave that impression. She'd once been a diving champion. If she was nervous about being in that study she knew so well, she didn't show it. She never showed much emotion—an inscrutable partner who was smart as a whip, her extreme reaction to a good joke being nothing more than her Asian Mona Lisa smile.

"I wonder why you weren't also threatened, Dao-Ming," Grasso said. "You and your partner were both responsible for sending old Paolo upstate."

"Neither one of us was responsible for that," I said with a frown. "He probably killed a lot of people, especially when he worked for you, but we didn't like him for the one they pinned on him."

"His relative probably doesn't know that," said Grasso. "I certainly didn't. No one tells me anything."

I almost laughed. Grasso always knew more than he let on. He was always scheming, always secretive. He could have been the director of Russia's SVR except that he was a patriot with little love for Putin. Or any dictator, for that matter. Putin and his Kremlin sycophants were just Russia's version of an Italian mob.

But he had a point. If I was blamed for Laurenzi's jail time and death, why not Chen too?

"My partner wrote the NYPD bolo for Laurenzi's apprehension," said Chen. "There probably was a federal one too. My name wouldn't be on either one. The Feds apprehended him at Newark Airport."

"That's a clue," said Grasso with a smile. "Some relative has access to police records."

"A small clue," I said. "How about some big ones? Can you produce a list of Laurenzi's relatives?"

"That's a problem. Old Paolo went through three wives, one with the Church and two outside. He might have had kids with all of them. Even a bastard child would share his DNA." He jerked a thumb toward his chest. "I never pay attention to my employees' families unless they're relatives of mine. You'll have to do some sleuthing, Detective Castilblanco. You'll need a lot of help. I'm sure Dao-Ming will take pity on you."

Had I just been called incompetent? Computer illiterate? Ignored the verbal jab. I was thinking daughters and sons were my first suspects. But Grasso had a point. Old philandering Paolo might have left his seed in more places than what was officially recorded. And never knowing a father could be as disturbing as losing a father, and either could cause a mentally disturbed child to seek revenge.

"How about his wives' names?" Figured wives would lead to kids.

"His last was Maureen. Nice Irish lady, I believe. She divorced the old boy when he started to fool around again." Grasso winked at Chen. "We Italians are romantics, you know."

"One name for it," I said. "We'll start with Maureen then."

After some irrelevant social chitchat about politics and a few more leers Grasso directed at Chen, we left the old man in his expensive study with its leather-bound first edition books that were only investments and not to be read.

"I hate that man," I said to Chen once inside the little hybrid we'd borrowed from the precinct's pool.

"I restrain myself," said Chen as she pulled out of the circular drive. "I'd kill him with my bare hands, but he probably has one or two thugs watching the whole proceedings, ready to pounce."

Bare hands? She could do it too. She didn't show emotion in body language, but she could show it with words.

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Before I became a Buddhist, I was a Catholic, same as Pam. Chen was and still is Catholic, same as hubby Eric. We both had the same idea: Visit Laurenzi's old church and check baptismal records. No divorces allowed, but kids could still be christened, and the parents duly recorded. Paolo would insist on it. For the most part, mafia members were churchgoers. Kids were my first suspects; moms could lead me to the guilty one.

By the time we found the church, I had a speech ready for the *padrecito*. He was sympathetic. Recent records were also computerized, but no such luck with the old ones. Chen returned to the precinct. I could get there by subway unless I found something that caused a detour.

I did. Maureen and Paolo had two children, a boy and a girl. Wife #1, Abriana, married to Paolo in that same church, had given Paolo two sons; and wife #2, Jemma, the first to live in sin with Paolo according to the Church, two boys and a girl. With everyone's names, it was time to return to the precinct and check databases. All the kids were candidates because the desire for revenge depended on how close the person had been to Paolo.

Maureen's boy was eliminated—that Marine had died in Afghanistan. Jemma's two boys were on the west coast. One worked as an EMT in Portland; the other was a script writer for sitcoms in Hollywood. One of Abriana's boys died in a car accident and the other was pursuing a military career and was stationed in Okinawa. Figured the living guys were out of the running because they were too far away. This perp had to be local.

That left the wives and two daughters—five people. The daughters were more suspect because of the DNA results, but moms too maybe, if they were directing the daughters. Or framing them because they loved Daddy too much? That thought occurred to me. The DNA evidence only said something about who licked the envelope, not who was directing the attacks.

Called my ME friend Big Tiny. He was an obese version of Vince Wilfork, one of the NFL's best nose tackles for many years. Didn't know Wilfork but loved both him and Big Tiny.

Went right to the point: "Can you transfer someone's DNA from somewhere else and make it look like that same someone licked an envelope?"

"Hmm. That would be a clever frame. You could do DNA and lift fingerprints too. Double whammy. Not my expertise exactly, so check with a forensics specialist. You must be working on an interesting case. Want to talk about it over a specialty coffee?"

"I'm still in New Jersey. I just needed a professional opinion."

"My professional opinion is that good forensics would probably detect the frame unless it was done with the framee's own saliva. That's definitely a possibility. Otherwise, there'd be two different DNA traces."

"Good intel. I owe you a double whatever with whatever. How's the diet?"

"I'm trying to walk more. This damn job is ruining my svelte figure."

Couldn't imagine Big Tiny ever having such a figure. He was a big man in every dimension. "You should wear out shoes in three months like me. I'll be in contact. Maybe treat you to a kale salad instead."

"Is that what you eat these days?"

"Hell no. For me, a Mediterranean diet means pasta dishes and garlic bread. Take care."

Pam kept me on the straight and narrow, though, so what I described was usually limited to nights out, and only because the kids loved pasta. Went early. Pedrito still liked to throw meatballs.

Thought about what Big Tiny had said. Didn't like the daughters for a revenge plan. One was a bank clerk in West Caldwell, a bit farther west than Clifton. The other was a nurse at Hackensack UMC, a major hospital in New Jersey—the UMC means University Medical Center, but there's no university there. Decided to interview the wives, hoping they could shed some light on the case, and come back to the girls later.

Solved some logistics first. Knew Chen could take up the slack for a while in the precinct, so called the boss and told him I was taking some days off. He was understanding, a rarity these days, but he had kids too.

### Chapter Three

"I hadn't seen Paolo in ages," Maureen Laurenzi said over her Starbucks coffee, "and I didn't go to his funeral."

She hadn't wanted to meet in her house, so I'd suggested a Montclair Starbucks, that shrine to over-roasted coffee beans as a neutral spot. There's nothing wrong with super-dark roast—I just don't like it. Many people do, but there's a scientific reason for the bitter taste—something about over-roasting breaking down stuff. I'd put a lot of creamer in mine—some people used salt—popped two Tums and told her my story.

Watched for body language. She expressed sympathy.

"I didn't pry too much into what Paolo did for old man Grasso, but I knew it probably wasn't legit. Grasso has a bad rep. When Paolo started fooling around with that pole dancer, I left him and moved here to New Jersey."

"You were number three. Did he come your way by fooling around too?"

"No way! I didn't even get serious with him until he showed me divorce papers cancelling the marriage with Jemma. I loved the SOB but demanded those papers because I knew I couldn't have a church wedding. We were very happy for a few years, you know." She seemed to look across the street to see if that bus to better times in the past had arrived.

"When were you told he was sent upstate?"

"He wrote me right after the trial. I think he was framed."

"Not framed, but my partner and I think they arrested the wrong person. The evidence wasn't circumstantial, though. They had his fingerprints."

"That's interesting. Just proves he was there, not that he killed her."

I hadn't said the victim was female. Maureen knew more than she was admitting. Made a mental note of that and plowed on. "How did your children take his imprisonment and death?"

"Not well. He was a good father for the most part, but we'd been separated for a while when he was arrested. Because he'd been a good father, the kids were sad when he passed on. An early cancer, you know. Well, not so early. He was eleven years older than me."

"Does your daughter have a family now?"

"Stella's dating an ex-patient. Go figure. Some guy from Fort Lee. Nice guy, even if he's Korean. They're getting serious, I think."

"No revengeful feelings in your family respect to Paolo?"

"Heavens no! He was pretty much out of our lives. Bobby, my oldest, thought Paolo had treated me badly, but he wouldn't be on a revenge mission."

Checked my notes. Roberto Laurenzi was Paolo's kid who died in Afghanistan. "And you?"

"No. I said I loved Paolo, but Bobby was right. When that bimbo had her baby, that was the last straw. I really didn't want to see him again."

Thought a moment. "Do you have the name of that pole dancer?"

"She's too stupid to hatch a plot like you've described."

I nodded. "But maybe not her son or daughter. What do you know about their lives?"

"Zero." She gave me the dancer's name.

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Turned out the pole dancer had retrained as a dental hygienist. Assumed the latter made more money. She lived in Nutley. Knocked on the door, saw someone peek around a curtain.

"NYPD," I said, showing my badge. Door opened a crack; saw the chain. "I need to talk."

"I've done nothing wrong."

"Still need to talk. Here, or at my precinct. That's in Manhattan, so here might be more convenient."

"You have no jurisdiction here."

"True. Shall I return with a Nutley cop?"

She shrugged. "No. Come in. I was just making coffee." Patricia Gronchi was in a pink housecoat and slippers. Saw a uniform on an ironing board, some late morning cooking show on TV. "I go to work at eleven, but I need breakfast, so do you want some toast or something?"

Hospitable. Good-looking. Sexy. Poor Paolo. But I liked Maureen better. "Just coffee is fine." Waited until she poured. Took my first sip. Decided Starbucks baristas needed to learn a thing or two from Ms. Gronchi. Would try to remember to ask her where she bought her coffee beans. Told my sad tale.

"And you think I have something to do with this?"

"Maybe not you. Maybe your kid? Did you know I was involved in Paolo's arrest?"

"Not specifically. He screwed up, as usual. I suppose Maureen put you up to this."

"I'm just chasing down Paolo's relatives. It's not out of the question one of his many women might be out for revenge."

"That would be Maureen, but she's after me, not you, Detective. Irish temper and all that. I guess I can't blame her. She had a hard life. All of us did."

"You were never married to the old fellow, I take it."

"I wanted to. Paolo had ceased to be the marrying type."

"But you had a kid?"

"Johnny. Giovanni's his real name, but he goes by Johnny."

"Where is he now?"

"Maybe Rikers. Maybe upstate. I'm sure you can find out."

“Is he the vengeful type?”

“He beat the crap out of a girlfriend once for looking at another guy. Jealous. Vengeful. Whatever you want to call it.”

“How was his relationship with Paolo?”

“They were close until Johnny started dealing drugs at college and got kicked out. Paolo didn’t like the drug business. Imagine that. He had scruples that way. He and Johnny fought about it and our kid became estranged, and then Johnny served some time. I think Paolo blamed himself, but I blamed Johnny. He just couldn’t straighten himself out.”

“Is he an addict?”

“No. He just deals.”

I handed her my card. “Call me if you hear from him or know his whereabouts.”

I’d nearly scratched Johnny off my list, but he was the only possible guy left. Still had two wives and two daughters to visit, though.

## Chapter Four

An interruption in my interviewing process occurred—Jin-Kyong was picking up our youngest, Pedrito, at daycare when someone dressed in black knocked her down. She managed to hold on to our boy. Said she’d kicked the assailant in the privates. Even with that, she couldn’t say whether the person was male or female.

“She or he was dressed like a Japanese ninja. I only saw the eyes.”

“Woman’s or man’s eyes?”

“Hard to tell. Definitely no eye makeup. The eyebrows were heavier than mine, but that doesn’t mean anything.” She was holding a cold compress to the back of her head. An EMT had checked her for a concussion and gave her the OK. “If Silvia hadn’t warned me, who knows what would have happened.”

Looked at her van. Pedrito was now in his car seat. Jin-Kyong’s two kids were in back of him and Ceci, who was on one of those booster chairs kids graduate to. They were all sucking on lollipops and looked happy.

Knew Silvia ran the daycare center. “I guess Silvia provided the lollipops?” Jin-Kyong nodded. Pam didn’t like to give our kids candy, but I figured she’d make an exception in this case. I’d already called her. She’d been heading to a crime scene in the TV news van. Told her Jin-Kyong and I had things under control. She’d talked to Ceci. “Did you see which way your attacker ran? Did he get into a car?”

“Ran off around the block toward 46.”

Route 46 and Route 3 are two main highways that go through Clifton and run nearly perpendicular to the Garden State Parkway. The first one goes over to the GW Bridge; the second to the Lincoln Tunnel. 46 is more of a local drag with stoplights in places.

“Probably had a getaway car parked on a side street. I called Ricky. He’ll get someone to canvas the neighborhood. Seeing a ninja running down the street is bound to stir up some gossip.”

“You arrived here quickly,” said Jin-Kyong.

“I was in the neighborhood sleuthing. As soon as Ricky Velasquez arrives and I talk to him, I’ll continue with that. You OK to drive?”

“The EMT thinks so, at least physically. Mentally, I don’t know. I’ve grown eyes in the back of my head since you told me about that note.”

“Just got a black one then. I’ll try to convince Ricky to double down on the protection for you when you make your trips with Ceci and Pedrito. Otherwise, I’ll do it. Looks like that second note in the backpack wasn’t an idle threat.”

“You really pissed someone off,” said Jin-Kyong.

“I do that a lot. I didn’t used to mind when it was just me they threatened. Now it’s different.”

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Velasquez took over the nursery school crime scene, so I returned to my sleuthing. Was considering whether to interview the two ex-wives first or the two daughters when Chen came through with intel that made me visit the nurse first. Her boyfriend had been in a barroom brawl, received a knife wound, and Maureen’s daughter had made a tourniquet with his belt. NYPD had arrested both of them but released the daughter. All that happened after the pair met when the boyfriend came out of surgery for a gunshot wound.

The daughter was RN Stella Laurenzi. She still worked in the OR and an operation was going on when I arrived. I waited. I was still waiting when I learned she had left for the day. Checked her home address.

When I arrived at the apartment, I could hear the shower running. She probably came home and hopped in. Thought about what to do in that situation when the elevator bell sounded and a Korean guy came out. Gun!

My reflexes aren’t what they used to be. Abs aren’t either. Hit the floor—the bullet clipped me in the upper left arm as I fell and knocked the wind out of me. By the time I finished gasping for air and had the safety off my Glock, the guy was gone.

That’s when Stella threw open the door and tried to smack me with a skillet. Hit my right arm, almost broke it. On the next swing, I caught the arm, pulled myself up at her expense, and wrapped her in a bear hug. Could feel the towel slipping.

“I’m NYPD and you could be in big trouble, but I don’t think you want to be prancing around naked in the corridor.”

She stopped thrashing around after a few seconds. I let her go and displayed my badge.

“Hell, did Min-Jun just shoot you? I heard a gunshot.”

“Yeah, he sort of did.” Figured Min-Jun was the Korean boyfriend. “You can tell me why while you take care of my wound. I think the bullet went all the way through.”

“Come on in. I’ll get a robe on and find a first-aid kit. You’ll also want to go to an ER, just in case.”

Sat on one of those counter stools as she worked on me. “Is your boyfriend just a hothead, or is he into something serious?”

“I’m into bad boys, I guess. Life with Min-Jun is exciting. I have no idea what he’s into, if anything, though. He’s secretive. Maybe he got the gun after I met him the first time. Someone shot him. That’s how I met him.”

“I know. I can check if he’s legally carrying. But he didn’t even ask who I was.”

She finished taping me. “I’ve had some threats.”

“Did you report them?”

“I talked to a police detective. He said he’d check into it.”

“Maybe you should be the one with the gun.”

“I hate guns. I don’t know why Min-Jun has one. He knows I hate them.”



“Probably why he didn’t tell you. Of course, you say he’s secretive.”

We talked some more. Stella Laurenzi didn’t say anything that removed her from my POI list, but she didn’t say anything that made me like her for going after my family and me either.

I left to interview the bank clerk with two very stiff arms and two pain killers in my belly.

## Chapter Five

Pam hated helicopters, but occasionally she’d have to ride in one. Learned about the following events from her.

Pilot was taking her to an accident scene on Long Island. Never could figure out why people tried to beat railroad crossing guards. A major accident occurred some years ago when some lady tried to do that. Figure it’s Darwin at work when it’s only the dimwit trying to beat the train who dies, but in that case, I remembered the rail had popped up, smashed into the first car, and killed more people, innocent passengers who paid for the person’s race to death. Family and lawyers tried to argue it was Metro North’s fault, but there were eyewitnesses and people yelling at her to move her car off the track. Never heard how that all turned out. Sure, there were no winners, especially the woman.

Pam’s accident scene was a little less tragic. Driver of a box truck carrying frozen chickens stalled on the LIRR tracks. He’d lost his life. Par for the course in the tristate area. With so much traffic and so many people, stuff happens, even though statistically on a per capita basis, they’re rare occurrences.

My wife didn’t even have to see the mess at the crossing. Didn’t mind if she was scooped by the other TV reporters either. The pilot noticed something wrong with the controls as soon as he started the chopper. Some hydraulic fluid underneath the bird was the clue. Someone had tampered with his machine.

I didn’t like small planes or helicopters either. I’d flown in the latter a lot during my years in the Navy. The military ones are mostly silent and can fly low under radars, but crashes still don’t usually have a lot of survivors. Fuel tanks are right there and, even assuming they don’t explode from being hit by a Stinger (yeah, al Qaeda in Afghanistan had them—we’d given them to the Afghans in their fight against Russia!), they often blow when the chopper crashes.

Pilot for the news chopper called NYPD. Pam called Chen. Uniforms in a patrol car and Chen arrived about the same time. CSIs a bit later.

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“You don’t suppose this is related to our threats, do you?” Pam said to Chen.

“We’ll see what the CSIs say. Looks like some hydraulic lines were cut, though. Lucky you have a good pilot.”

“We have several. They’re sympathetic toward my fear of helicopters too. But how would someone know I was going up in one today?”

“Maybe something like a news announcer saying they’re sending star reporter Pam Stuart to the scene?”

“Hmm. Yes, they do that sometimes. Rollie calls it ‘marking the territory.’ But whoever did this would have to react quickly. Between knowing about the assignment and my arriving

here, it couldn't have been more than thirty minutes. Maybe forty today because we had to work our way around a protest."

"Someone could just be waiting for the opportunity, not knowing your preference is to avoid choppers." Chen watched the CSIs for a moment. "It could be an inside job too."

Pam returned to the studios for a different assignment. She later found out that it was sabotage. If that weren't bad enough, the email I discovered later was chilling: "Detective Castilblanco, now that your dear wife is dead, you know I'm serious." Obviously wondered if I could somehow trace it.

Called DHS agent Ashley Scott.

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I'd known Scott for years. She'd been on that task force with me that went after a Mexican cartel leader. After pleasantries and a brief explanation of what was going on, which appalled her, she passed me to her computer guru Singh.

"Sure, forward me the email" he said. "But it's likely a waste of time. People can open up email accounts under assumed names using publicly available computers, like in a library. Very talented people will also use techniques to bounce stuff around various servers. Not like when hackers hack into known computers or servers when someone gets careless or a company leaves a backdoor. There are firms that show tech companies the error of their ways."

"The email assumes whoever sabotaged the chopper was successful in killing my wife. I want that person."

"Understood. I'd feel the same way. I'm just warning you: I probably won't be able to help. The internet is like the wild, wild West. I can hear Morricone's theme song as we speak."

"What the hell is that?"

"Music for *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Not a bad description of the internet and hackers."

Thought I remembered the movie. My bad and ugly experience out West had been fighting that cartel. Knew the guy who replaced the cartel leader we took down was already dead. Could they still want revenge? Unlike the mafia, at least in folklore, who killed you and sent flowers to your family, the cartels just wiped out everyone. Maybe a step above ISIS but not a big one.

"If you happen to get out of your nostalgia funk, could you check out the email and let me know if you find anything?"

"Of course. Say hi to Detective Chen for me. And Pam, of course."

Singh had a thing for Chen. And people thought Hispanics were macho romantics!

## Chapter Six

Naomi Laurenzi had been fired. Talked to her ex-boss.

"She started to get weird about a month ago," said the bank manager. "She wanted to move up to a position we needed to fill. The bank transferred another person to take it, a parallel transfer, so she became upset."

"How well do you check your employees' backgrounds?" I said.

“Not my job. We take the occasional application and send it to state HQ for vetting. I’m just a branch manager, Detective. My job is to keep this branch functioning well. That’s all.”

“Understood.”

I had Naomi’s address, so I went there. Was prepared for boyfriends with guns and women with skillets this time. Instead, a building super in curlers and bathrobe stuck her head out of a third story window when I rang Naomi’s bell at the entrance of her building.

“Haven’t seen her for two days. You should check with her employer.”

Flashed my badge. “Been there; did that. Did she move out?”

“I hope not. Rent’s coming due. If she skipped out, I’ll ask you to arrest her or something.”

“Not my jurisdiction. I’m NYPD.”

“Is she involved in a crime?”

“Maybe. I just need to talk to her.”

“Let me check her apartment. I have a key. Hold on a second.”

I waited five minutes, not a second, until she returned to the window. “Place is a mess. All her stuff is still there, though, far as I can tell.”

“Can I go up?”

“Yeah, with a warrant. You should know better.”

“I’ll get one and be back.”

Kind of amusing she’d gone in and snooped and I couldn’t, but I couldn’t argue with the U.S. Constitution.

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Took me until the next day to convince the locals to produce a search warrant. Didn’t exactly give it to me either. A local West Caldwell detective had to handle the search. I waited in the hall with the super with curlers.

The detective, Omar Austin, after rummaging around a bit, came to Naomi’s front door, shaking his head. “You’ll want to see this, Castilblanco. Come on in. Not you, Mrs. Kelly.” Austin handed me Teflon booties and rubber gloves. Followed him inside after putting them on. “In the spare bedroom.”

That bedroom had washed but wrinkled men’s and women’s clothes in a basket and an ironing board. Junk all around—old boxes filled with stuff, books and magazines stacked up, old suitcases and duffel bags.

The closet was open. Austin had pushed back a bunch of coats, slacks, and a few suits to reveal a corkboard. Pictures of my family and me were on it with bullseyes painted on them with magic marker. Chen’s family too. Newspaper articles were also there, dating all the way back to Paolo Laurenzi’s last arrest and his later death.

“Looks like Naomi Laurenzi is definitely a POI,” said Austin.

Had Chen convinced herself she wasn’t a target? “Can I search the place?” I said.

“We’ll search the place together. That’s what the gloves and booties are for. The bed looks like she had a live-in, though, so I want to make sure we don’t disturb anything. We want to know who the boyfriend is.”

“Maybe she left with him,” I said, starting with the extra bureau in the spare bedroom. In the second drawer was the ninja suit and an H&K pistol. Held it up to Austin. “I’m wondering why she just didn’t shoot me.”

“Revenge is complicated. She wanted to make you suffer as much as she suffered.”

“After we’re finished, I’ll go talk to the mother. Maybe she knows where she is.”

“Tread carefully with that. They might be in on it together.”

Daughter and mother? Interesting theory.

We found a bit more evidence—cut up old magazines in the kitchen garbage can. I wondered if Naomi Laurenzi was returning to her apartment with all her stuff still there.

Left to look for Jemma, wife #2.

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“Going somewhere?” I’d watched Jemma Laurenzi come out of her townhouse and throw a suitcase into the back of her Honda Civic.

She spun and faced me. “Who are you?”

Flashed my badge. “Detective Rolando Castilblanco, NYPD. Your daughter has been stalking my family.”

“My daughter’s crazy. I can’t help her.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

She slumped. “I was taking her some clothes. She’s not well, Detective.”

“Even if she’s criminally insane, you’re now an accomplice. Tell me where she is.”

“I don’t know. I’m meeting her in Upper Montclair in the CVS parking lot.”

“Mind if I tag along?”

“Yes!”

Pulled out my handcuffs. “Then we’ll do it the hard way.”

I gave Ricky Velasquez a call. He agreed to meet us at the CVS. I installed Jemma in the passenger seat of my hybrid—had liked the department’s new fleet additions so much, I’d bought one—and headed for Montclair, a big NYC suburb like Clifton. Ricky had agreed to call Montclair PD.

It was overkill—four uniforms from Montclair, Ricky from Clifton, and me—but especially because Naomi wasn’t there.

Not visible anyway. While Jemma glowered at all of us, we tried to decide how to proceed. That old story about blind men and the elephant came to mind as I listened to the locals and bit my tongue. It was their party. Part of the debate was that I hadn’t had the authority to detain Jemma. Didn’t particularly care about the legal niceties, but the Montclair cops were worried about being sued.

“Did you formally arrest her?” said Ricky, trying to break the legal impasse.

“Nope,” I said. “I offered to follow her here. She didn’t want to allow that, so I thought she might harm herself and others by driving too fast while trying to lose me.”

“Wouldn’t you just come here in that case?” said one Montclair cop.

I shrugged and smiled. He hadn’t exactly called me a liar.

“Doesn’t matter then,” said Ricky. “I’m arresting her as an accomplice in my Clifton case. Thank you for being a good citizen, Rollie.”

Smiled again. “Any time, neighbor.”

Ricky helped Jemma out of my car, took her to his patrol vehicle, and opened the backdoor. That’s when she was shot.

I was nowhere near Jemma, but I hit the ground with everyone else. Good thing. The next shot was for me.

That got the Montclair guys seriously involved, along with cops from a few other municipalities in the area. They didn't catch Naomi. Figured they would eventually, so I went to Jin-Kyong's house to pick up Ceci and Pedrito.

## Chapter Seven

We arrived and I followed the kids into our house but stopped dead in my tracks. A woman sat in my favorite chair, gun pointed at us. Saw an open backpack on the kitchen table. From the resemblance to Jemma, figured this was Naomi.

Stepped in front of the kids. "It's me you want. Leave the kids alone."

"Is the bitch dead?"

Decided that was Jemma. "Last I heard, it will be a close call. She's critical and in Mountainside Hospital. I know you want me dead. Why your mother?"

"All I heard all my life was that Daddy was such a terrible person, that he'd left Mom destitute to marry Maureen, that she wanted both Daddy and Maureen dead. That screaming bitch was after me all the time, especially when I missed Daddy as a little girl. She'd beat me until I said I hated him too. I'd have nightmares about it all."

I nodded. "Okay, a bit extreme, but I understand. Why my family and me?"

Saw the tears and the shaking gun. Did she have the safety on? Couldn't tell. "I hated you and that Chinese witch for taking Daddy away. I hated Mom for hating Daddy. Hating you all helped make the nightmares go away, especially as I planned my revenge. Does that still make sense, super Detective Rolando Castilblanco?"

Was Chen in trouble? "Maybe to a prison psychiatrist. You realize you have most of northern Jersey looking for you. Even if you kill me, you won't escape."

A shot exploded from that shaking gun, the bullet hitting our nice hardwood floor between my feet. Splinters bit into my legs. Ceci and Pedrito ran in opposite directions. When Naomi followed Ceci with the gun, I acted.

I smashed into her like defensive end J. J. Watts from the Texans used to hit an offensive left end to clear the way to the quarterback. Didn't worry too much about how hard until afterwards, but it was hard enough to send the gun flying. My chair tipped over and I had her pinned. Ricky had my cuffs, so I crab-walked her into the kitchen and used garbage ties on her hands and feet. Found wires and connectors in her backpack.

Felt my arm throbbing and noticed the crimson stain on Stella's bandage. Needed to get that looked at. But my first call was to Chen. The second was to Ricky.

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Caught Chen in her parking garage ready to take the elevator up to her apartment. She had her new baby with her, just a normal Mommy and kid going home to wait for Daddy. Told her to call the bomb squad. If she'd opened that apartment door, Daddy Eric would have been a young widower grieving for his wife and kid.

Didn't know whether to make a case file on my computer about Jemma and her daughter. Really Ricky's case, not mine.

Later learned that Jemma had been sentenced to five years and Naomi was in an institution for the criminally insane for an undetermined stay. Her boyfriend had left her and was

in the wind. Turned out he was a helicopter mechanic employed by Pam's news station. She'd rolled over on him, so it was only a matter of time before he was caught.

I declined to press charges against the skillet-wielding Stella. Her boyfriend received a reprimand and desk duty for a while. A DEA agent like Chen's Eric Kulmala, he knew about the threats against Stella, so he had assumed the worst when he saw me. He'd also assumed I would be firing back—occupational reflex. He'd been outside dialing 9-1-1 when he saw Stella fixing my arm. Admitted his error to his boss. Still think he's a hothead. Completely different from Kulmala. Authorities were still looking for the person who had threatened Stella.

The four of us, Pam and I and Chen and Eric, hoped to forget about Paolo Laurenzi and his crazy family. Ceci and Pedrito had nightmares for a while. Figured some fatherly TLC with my usual bedtime stories would vanquish those soon enough. Kids had been through enough with their crazy father.

I'd soon have enough years to get my full pension from NYPD. Began to think that retiring might be a good idea. Nobody loves cops anymore. Had those thoughts before, of course.

## The Retiree

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#### Preface

As some of my readers know (maybe from the "Esther Brookstone" series or the Sleuthing, British-Style collections), binge-reading (and writing!) British-style mysteries helped me get through the Covid pandemic (they still do). Although this story starts in Mexico, it's very much a British-style mystery. Brits often holiday in Spain, but Harry Burns has gone a bit farther to find his retirement Shangri-La. What brings him home to Britain is part of the story, of course.

#### Chapter One

"*Señor, creo que alguien venga,*" said the housekeeper.

Harold Burns knew that meant someone was coming, so he became alert. He stopped watching her bairn playing in the wet sand at water's edge, shaded his eyes, and looked along the beach, where he saw a tall woman striding towards him, dressed in a bikini, terry-cloth top cover, broad-rimmed hat, and sunglasses.

They hadn't had any visitors since the estate agent had given him the keys for their little cottage. As far as beachfront property went, the lease had been a bargain. The solitude was well worth every pound spent.

He didn't like visitors. He trusted no one, not in Mexico, even in Baja California where *gringos* weren't uncommon, especially out in the fishing boats.

"*Coge el niño y esconde adentro,*" he said, telling Maria to hide inside the little cottage with her son. He reached into his kit, pulled out his gun, and hid it under his towel. *Be just like them to send a woman!*

She stopped about five meters away from where he sat underneath an umbrella like a pensioner. He was one, in fact, and hoped to stay one long enough to enjoy his later years. And keep Maria and her child alive too.

"I wish you'd put the gun away, Mr. Burns. It doesn't allow for a civilized chinwag." She popped her bikini bra. "And I can't hide one in this outfit. If you were truly a good detective, you'd know that."

He didn't put the gun away. "That top cover has deep pockets, lass. Even with it, you remind me of Ursula Andress in that first Bond movie. You're obviously British, not Swiss, but who the hell are you?"

"A damsel in distress? I need a good PI. I've heard you are one."

"Retired. You've come a long way for nothing, Miss...?"

"Penelope Donne, from Birmingham. My aunt said you're just the clever man I need."

He smiled. If he were thirty years younger, he might have acted on the second meaning that statement might have. "Who's your aunt?" *Maybe someone where that second meaning was more appropriate?*

"Lady Violet Clayborn."

He nodded. He remembered the case where he'd proven Lord Clayborn was having an affair with his PA. That had led to a messy divorce with Lady Clayborn making Lord Clayborn a lot less wealthy.

"Your aunt must have given me one hell of a good recommendation for you to come all this way. But like I said, you've come a long way for nothing. I'm retired from the game. This is my home where I want to spend my golden years."

She looked towards the cottage. "Is the woman your wife?"

"A very good friend. I saved her and the bairn from the father, a drugs smuggler who'd threatened to kill her and the wee lad if she left him."

"I assume you convinced him that was a bad idea."

"I did in a way. He's dead. I had to kill the bastard." She didn't seem shocked. "Maria keeps our little home sorted. Gives her a place to live and makes my retirement a lot more comfortable."

She wrapped herself in her own arms. "I have a similar problem. Aunt Violet said you'd be able to help me."

He saw the tears. *Oh, bollocks!* "Okay. Come inside and tell me about it over tea."

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"*Te para la señorita tambien?*" Maria asked.

Burns nodded. "*Tambien unas galletas, por favor, si lo es posible.*"

Maria retreated to the kitchen to prepare tea and biscuits.

They then sat around a rough-hewn dining table where they could see the child playing in the little cacti garden at the back of the cottage.

"Tea and biscuits," Penelope said with a sad, tired smile. "An Englishman needs his tea and biscuits."

"True enough about the need, but I'm Scottish. I'm not related to Robert Burns, though, or any toff named Harold. Harry. Harry Burns." Of course, she already knew that from her aunt. He eyed her. "So, what's the problem?"

"I have a stalker."

"Tell the coppers. I can recommend some plods in Birmingham to contact. Do you know who he is, this stalker?"

She looked a bit embarrassed. The arrival of the tea service allowed her to recover. She took a sip, nodded approvingly, and looked across the brim at Burns. "My stalker is a woman."

"That's a new one for me, I dare say. What's her name?"

"Annie Oliphant. She's a journalist. We met at a party. I guess she became obsessed with me."

"I could imagine a young lad doing that, but a lassie? Seems a bit weird."

"It was a gay party. I'm lesbian, Mr. Burns."

He put down his cup. "Again, it's Harry. That must disappoint a few red-blooded males. Has she been threatening you?"

Penelope now searched in her cleavage, pulled out a folded paper instead of a gun, and handed it to him. "Just a sample."

He unfolded it and read the message aloud:

*Penny, I will kill you if you continue to ignore me and resist my many charms.*



"This Annie Oliphant has a high opinion of herself, I dare say. You've received more of these?"

"Yes. And a dead cat with knife in its brain and feces in a package. I also received an envelope with powder in it. I had it analyzed. Nothing dangerous, fortunately."

"Um, I get the picture. Seems like enough for the plods to go after this woman and arrest her."

"They say they don't have enough evidence because I contaminated it by opening everything."

"Maybe. Or they just don't want to be bothered. Some rozzers don't like gays, and the male plods don't like lesbians. Yet they look the other way when pimps abuse the kerb-crawlers. I say to each his own, but a lot of people aren't so open-minded. Wasn't that long ago that homosexuality was still a crime. Look what happened to Alan Turing."

"You know a bit of history, Mr. Burns."

"You can call me Harry. So why do you think I can help?"

"My aunt says you can do the impossible."

"Lord Clayborn thought he was clever, but he walked into my trap. Yours is a different situation, and it might be a bit more dangerous. You just never know what a crazy, obsessed person will do. In your case, I'd use close surveillance on your stalker, catch her in the act. Which the police won't do, of course. Don't have the personnel or the funding." He looked towards the kitchen, just off the dining room where they sat. "*Maria! Empaca las maletas. Vamos a Inglaterra, mujer!*"

"Did I understand you correctly?" Penelope said. "You'll come to England and help me?"

"With one condition: Maria and her son must come along. I need to get them out of Mexico. If I leave them here in Baja alone, they'll eventually be killed by her husband's *amigos*."

"Done!" she said.

Her enthusiasm was evident. He'd negotiate fees later. *Or is Auntie Violet paying? That might make the case a bit more lucrative!*

## Chapter Two

Lady Clayborn surprised Burns. She embraced both Maria and her son Joaquin and then hugged him. *Not a prejudiced bone in her toff body!*

"Can you tell them, Mr. Burns, that they're both welcome here?"

The PI did so, and Maria smiled. The bairn was still standing in awe of the huge mansion.

"She can help around the house," he said, "until I get her and the lad sorted and find her work somewhere. Thanks, Violet. She'll be a lot safer here."

"You have to make her legal, old boy, so they don't confuse her with a refugee."

"In a sense, that's what they are: Refugees from cartel violence."

Lady Clayborn's tall niece was paying the taxi driver. "You've done well for yourself, madame," Burns said, looking around the estate. "Whipped the old place into shape, you did. Lord Clayborn must regret losing it now."

"He never really cared for the place. I run tourists through here in spring, summer, and fall, and all the upkeep's covered by that. But do grab your luggage and come inside. We must have a proper chinwag over tea. It's so lovely to have Penelope visit again too, and it gets her away from that awful Oliphant woman."

They had tea in the attached greenhouse. Maria helped serve. They all enjoyed watching Joaquin cavort around the rear garden.

"I hope he doesn't catch a cold. There's a chill in the air today. I do hope we'll have some snow on Christmas Eve, though. Gracias, Maria."

"*De nada*," Maria said to Violet after pouring her tea.

After Maria left, Lady Clayborn leaned toward Burns. "We must teach her English, Harry. What do they call it? Ah, I remember now: An ESL course. I'll hire a tutor for her and her lad."

"I'm going to try to find a position for her in the city. She might not be here long enough to make money you pay a tutor well spent."

"Pish-tosh, dear Harold. Thanks to you, I'm financially well off, and now I control the purse strings. I don't have to live on Lord Clayborn's meager allowance anymore. I can use my money anyway I like."

He laughed. "We'll see about the tutoring." He winked at Penelope. "Right now, my first task is to help your niece. We'll be going into Birmingham, day after tomorrow."

"My suggestion is to put the fear into this Oliphant woman, the fear of God, Harold. Tell her if she doesn't leave Penelope alone, she'll be sorry."

"Aunt Violet, please," Penelope said.

"My goal is to put the woman behind bars, Violet. But it wouldn't do us any good if she has me arrested for threatening her, turning the tables, as it were."

"Um, no, that wouldn't do, not at all. I see your point. But if you got the goods on my ex-husband, surely you can get the goods on that trollop."

"That's the idea."

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Later, before dinner, Burns walked with Penelope down the lane to the lake.

"Beach doesn't compare with Baja's, but the lad might still be able to take a swim here."

"You're a strange man, Harry," Penelope said. "You strike me as a person who doesn't like encumbrances, yet you're very attached to Maria and her son."

He shrugged. "My sister never had children. Joaquin is like a nephew, Maria like a sister. I saved them from certain death. I'll admit I never expected that kind of trouble when I bought the place in Baja."

"Will Mexico ever get rid of the cartels?"

"People are too scared, from people like Maria all the way up to the government VIPs. Drugs will probably destroy the world. Huxley's brave new world, only worse."

"Um, and you think you can change it?"

"I'm getting tired, but I might go after one scrote at a time as long as I can. Yours us a test case about whether I can still be in the game. Tell me about this Oliphant woman."

"She's quite pretty and intelligent. I was attracted to her too until I saw another side of her."

"Were you intimate?"

"Is that important?"

"She might feel that cemented a relationship."

"We weren't. I went to her flat and then backed out of there fast."

"Why?"

"I could see she was too controlling. She even admitted her last partner had walked out on her because she was."

"Yet she didn't go after that ex-partner."

"I got the impression she'd wanted to end it too. She wanted someone like me, maybe thinking I'd be obedient and servile?"

"And rich? You don't strike me like that kind of person, I mean obedient. You're a lot like your aunt."

Penelope laughed. "Yes, she's a tough old bird, my aunt. And much smarter than her ex. She should be the one in the House of Lords."

"That would cause a bit of a stir, I imagine. Those old toffs use it as an aristocratic men's club. Of course, I'm not one to like politicians. They're only slightly less annoying than the royal family."

"I imagine you're for Scottish independence?"

"I don't have a position on that. And Scottish politicians are just as bad. So is Police Scotland."

She eyed him now, for they'd stopped to watch a pair of geese with their young. "Were you a copper, Harry?"

"Long ago. They needed a scapegoat and nominated me. Full scale investigation if I hadn't resigned. Either way, my career was over. That all happened in Old Reekie long ago. I have better relations with the English plods. The ones you went to might be an exception, though."

### Chapter Three

Harry looked around Penelope's flat. *Nice, but not exactly secure.* "Too much art," he said.

She smiled. "Some of the art's my own; other art I bought from some talented friends. I'll admit it's a menagerie of current art styles, but some of these paintings might be worth a lot by the time I'm as old as my Aunt Violet."

He sank into a modern chair that looked comfortable; it was. "Are you going to be okay here? I can understand why you might be paranoid. Who brought in that mail, by the way?"

"Our doorman Ralph. He has a key."

"Maybe you should open it before I leave."

"You're not staying?"

"I'm not your bodyguard, Penelope; I'm your PI."

She sank into the matching chair. "I just thought...." She smiled, although her thoughts were probably not humorous. "You're safe here, you know. I won't try to seduce you."

"I realize that. But you need your privacy. There's a hotel two blocks from here. You have a moby. I can be here in five minutes, max."

"That's a waste of money, Burns. I have an extra bedroom."

He thought a moment. "Make me a better offer. What's for dinner?"

"Indian takeaway washed down with Shiraz."

"I love that Californian wine. But what kind of take-away?"

"Whatever we order. They have it down to a science because of Covid. *Samosas, tikka masala, vindaloo*...I have a menu around here somewhere. The restaurant's nearer than your hotel."

"You convinced me. Show me the room." She led him to it. "It's an art studio!"

"All my supplies and easel are in the corner, Harry. There's a sofa-bed, though. I've even slept on it after I paint. I come in here to do something productive when I can't sleep."

He didn't have to ask why she had trouble sleeping. He sniffed. "Peculiar odor. Not here." He walked out and pointed to the pile of mail. "Let's go through that. Something reeks."

He didn't bother to look for rubber gloves in his luggage because, knowing Ralph had brought in the mail and the mailman had previously handled it, any forensics evidence would be questionable.

They found more feces spread between pages of a magazine.

"Pig, I think. Their shite stinks like human feces. Anything else?"

She kept glancing at the magazine. "No, just bills."

"Any chance Ralph is collaborating with Oliphant?"

"Not on your life! He's a nice old man!"

"It's your life I'm worried about, lassie. She's intercepting your mail somehow before he brings it up. I can use that."

"How?"

"Catching her in the act. Mail tampering is illegal."

"She couldn't just send it herself?"

"It's a magazine, so no. But it was in a sleeve. That makes it easy for her to do what she did. I'd change to the online version, if there is one."

"I don't know if *British Art World* has an online version. It comes four times per year."

She sounded pissed. Burns thought she looked even more like her aunt with that sour expression, which Lady Violet no longer had, thanks to him.

"Okay, calm down. I *am* going to stay here. Tomorrow morning, I start watching. When does Ralph come on duty?"

"Seven a.m."

"Um, okay. I'll have to charge you extra for losing my beauty rest." Her frown told him she didn't find that humorous. "Just kidding, woman. And don't worry. You can sleep like a baby, even have a lie-in tomorrow."

"I have to get back to work at the gallery. I'll be up before you, if not before."

"You work at a gallery?" She nodded. "Has Oliphant ever visited there?"

"Not with me around. But I can ask."

"Especially about the time you were in Mexico. Any chance she knows where you were headed? Or about me?"

"I don't know, Burns. I don't know what's going on!"

He thought she might be losing it. "Sit down, Penelope. Let's talk."

She wrung her hands after sitting at the table. "About what?"

"My plans. They'll make you feel better, I hope."

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Harry knew what Oliphant looked like—he'd cropped a selfie Penelope had made at the party—but he didn't think he'd have much luck with his early morning surveillance. The coffee made him burp *vindaloo*. He'd thought he'd be okay with it after his Baja diet. *Different spices*, he guessed.

He was resigned to returning to Penelope with no news when he spotted Oliphant. He knew Ralph was in his little backroom making his coffee. He watched her enter and place a package on the doorman's little counter where he sorted mail deliveries for the building. He entered the foyer behind her.

"What are you leaving for Penelope Donne today?" he said.

She spun around, her face contorted in anger. Another surprise: She pulled a knife from her purse.

"Back off, Mr. Burns! You don't know what you're getting into!"

He backed off reluctantly, and she slipped past him. By the time he turned around, she was gone.

"We need to talk," Harry said to Penelope when he returned to her flat.

"Sorry, Harry, I need to get to work."

"I'll go with you."

"Really? What do you want to talk about?"

"Oliphant was here."

She dropped her purse. He picked it up and handed it to her.

"Easy. Let's get you to work. We can talk on the way."

"The underground isn't the best place to have a serious conversation."

"We'll take a taxi. I know someone who drives one." He made a call. "Peter? Your old friend Harry Burns. I need a ride."

## Chapter Four

"Penelope, my taciturn friend here is Peter Srivastava. His mother makes great *samosas*, much better than we had last night."

Srivastava nodded a greeting. "Where to, Harry?"

Burns glanced at Penelope.

"European Art Gallery. Um, I work there, but I can't remember the address."

Srivastava fiddled with his GPS. "Got it. I'm going to wind around a bit to avoid some construction, so hold on."

He stomped on the pedal, sending Penelope back against the rear seat.

"Now, here's the thing, young lassie. This Oliphant is more than a stalker. I don't know what she is, but I'm betting she's not a journalist nor only a stalker."

"She said she worked for *The Guardian*."

"Did you confirm that?"

"Um, no. I suppose I should have done."

"Damn right. I'll do that. Something stinks here, and it isn't just pig feces."

"What do you mean by more than a stalker?"

He thought a moment. *How do you explain a hunch?* "She hasn't threatened you at work, or in the underground, or walking about, right?" Penelope nodded. "Only in your flat, and there in multiple ways?" Again, a nod. "You see, that's strange."

"She just wants to scare me, and she's succeeding."

"What's your take, Pete?"

"I'm not supposed to be listening, Guv."

"But you are. I know it. This Oliphant woman had a knife, Pete. But she only waved it at me and didn't try to stab me. How long have I been gone?"

"Almost two years. I thought you were dead, being a PI and all that. I even burned incense for you."

"And smoked a lot of weed as well, I suppose."

"That too."

"We'll have to get together and celebrate my reincarnation properly then. But doesn't it seem strange to you? This woman knew my name. And I never met Penelope here before she found me in Baja, just her old Aunt Violet."

"Maybe this stalker woman's obsessed with you too and is jealous of Violet. Or she just needs a flat. You missed out on most of the pandemic, Guv. People dug in, stayed put. Not many flats available in Birmingham now for someone who wants to live in the city. My cousin and his wife are living with us now because they can't find a place they can afford."

"Um, seems like Oliphant's going to a lot of trouble to drive Penelope out of her flat. That's absurd. Ah, here we are. Mind if I come in, Penelope? I'd like you to introduce me to your work colleagues, and then I'll ask them some questions."

"They don't know what's going on with Oliphant, Harry. That could be embarrassing."

"I think we're beyond embarrassment. She came at me with a knife, damn it!"

"Okay, I guess. How much do I owe you, Pete?"

"Ride's on Harry's tab. He pays me each month. That's why I was sad when I thought he'd died." Pete was still chuckling as they exited the car.

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They entered the European Art Gallery where Penelope's co-workers welcomed her with hugs and air-kisses. Harry stood back and watched with a smile. Penelope then introduced him, and he explained what he was doing there. They were shocked to hear Penelope's horror story. They seemed like good people, from the manager to the handyman, so he handed his mobile around with the picture of Oliphant and went right to the question of the morning: Had anyone seen this woman? No one had.

"We get a few weird characters in here now and then," Steve Wilson, the manager, said. "Ted here has had to intercede at times."

Harry smiled at Ted, the burly handyman. Harry already knew him to be a man of few words and thought he might be an ex-rugby player. He was probably someone who could do more than "intercede." And he was someone you wanted on your side.

"Okay." Burns now scanned the whole group. "If this woman comes in, please let me know." He recovered his mobile and handed out his business cards.

"Are the police looking for her?" Steve said.

"No, they say there's not enough evidence."

"But you saw her put the package in Penelope's building's foyer, and she came at you with a knife."

"My bad. I should have talked to the police about that. It just happened this morning. But you make a good point: I'll visit the plods after leaving here. I know a few. They might listen now." He turned to Penelope. "I'll drop by to escort you home when you're off work."

She nodded. She still felt embarrassed by the whole thing.

## Chapter Five

DI Christopher Donnell made a steeple with his hands and propped his cleft chin on its apex.

"I should have known this wasn't a social visit, Harry."

"I could always count on you, Chris. I want to report a knife attack."

"Um, okay. I'm not surprised you're not wounded. I take it you got the better of him?"

"Her. It was a woman. To put a fine point on it—and forget about the pun—she just threatened me."

Chris pulled out a notepad and biro. "Okay. Let's have your sordid tale. You tend to upset the women in your life, so my heart strings sing for them."

He told Chris the whole story about Penelope's stalker, from Baja to Birmingham.

"I can't make any promises about helping, you know," Chris said at the end of the story.

"Only if you want to...and can. I think something bigger's going down than just a simple stalking, as gross as it's been. Everything's focused on the flat, nowhere else. And it bothers me that this Oliphant woman knows who I am."

"Sounds a bit more than lesbian obsession, I'll give you that. Do you have a picture of this stalker?"

"I do. Let me send it to you. What's your email address?"

When Donnell received the photo, he studied it. "No one I know, but I can run it through HOLMES and other databases to see if she has form. Not on *The Guardian's* staff, I presume."

"That was a complete lie. In fact, I can't find anything about Annie Oliphant. Hopefully you'll come up with something, and we'll then know what's going on here beyond the stalking."

"Is this Penelope desperate? Will she move out of her flat?"

"Except for the doorman, I have yet to query the building's staff or owners. The doorman's an old wrinklie—nice fellow, but maybe not that observant? I don't think he's involved."

"If we, or you, find Oliphant, we can arrest her for threatening you, but I have to back my colleagues. You need proof of the stalking incidences. Did you or Penelope keep what was sent to her?"

"Just the last package, which we didn't open. The doorman handled everything, so forget forensics."

Donnell nodded. "Give me the co-workers' names too. I'll search for form on them as I search for a match to Oliphant's pic. That's about all I can do for now."

"I understand. That will still help."

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When Penelope and Harry returned to her flat that evening, they took the package and other mail upstairs. This time he used his latex gloves.

Penelope nearly fainted when she saw the grim grin of the Capuchin monkey's head, its lips sewn together. *Telling her not to talk?* Harry asked himself. *Or both of them?*

While Penelope recovered from that, Harry tried to fathom if there could be any other symbolic meaning. He couldn't think of any.

Later, when they were about to order takeaway dinner again, Chris Donnell called on Burns's moby. He put it on speakerphone.

"Good and bad news, old stick. Annie Oliphant doesn't exist as far as HOLMES and other databases are concerned. Facial recognition, though, says she's likely Zelda Nielsen. Now that's where it gets interesting."

"Does this Zelda have form?"

"No, but she was the previous lessee of Penelope's flat, and she's Henry Elwood's girlfriend."

"First is intriguing, but the second: Who the hell is Henry Elwood?"

"A jewelry thief who's up for five and about to get out of the king's resort."

"Still doesn't explain why this Zelda is stalking Penelope."

"Can't help you there. She's been Elwood's regular visitor, though. Maybe the two have something illegal going on?"

"And it involves Penelope?" She was shaking her head next to Burns. "That's a stretch, Chris. But okay. Thanks a lot for the information. Those are all useful pieces to have to solve this puzzle."

"You have interesting contacts, Harry," Penelope said after he'd rung off. "But now what? And what am I supposed to do with that damn monkey's head?"

"I could send it to Donnell for forensic analysis, but I'm betting we'll only get monkey traces. This Zelda probably knows all about forensic science, considering who her boyfriend is. Most low-lives do nowadays."

"So, we can do nothing?"

"We can order takeaway."

## Chapter Six

After a Chinese dinner, they were watching BBC One like an old married couple: Another member of the royal family was involved in a scandal, causing them to shake their heads.

"You'd think they'd walk the straight and narrow," Burns said, "considering the taxpayers give those toffs a free ride."

"You're not a monarchist, I suppose," Penelope said with a smile.

"I'm still enough of a Scotsman to think they're just parasites."

"Scotland had kings and queens too."

"But it's practically independent now, with many wanting even more independence. I got in on the first years of the new Police Scotland that might have helped that along a bit, seeing as how it's organized as if Scotland were independent."

She laughed. "All weighty issues far beyond my immediate problem, Harry. I'm thinking about quitting my job, giving up this flat I love so much, and going to live with Aunt Violet. I've had enough!"

"Monkey head's a bit over the top, I'll admit. Like that Hitchcock schlock." He thought a moment. "Say that again!"

She did, almost word for word, but he stopped her at "giving up this flat."

"Zelda rented this place before you. That's significant!"

"How? I never met her before that one night. Certainly not when I moved in here. There wasn't any overlap."

"How long ago was that?"

Penelope's brow wrinkled. "Almost six years now, maybe a bit more."



Burns did a calculation. "We need some exact dates. Who's the landlord?"

"Never met him. I worked with a finders agent and his lawyer. The owner's some bloke in Australia. But Ralph might have some records."

Ralph was eating a sandwich and also watching BBC One.

"Evening, Miss Donne and Mr. Burns. You caught me. I'm on until eight, so I usually have a little snack. I can only offer you coffee. Sorry."

"Oh, you can offer something else," Harry said. "Hopefully. We want to confirm the date the previous lessee of Penelope's flat moved out."

"Um, let me check." He went to a small file unit and returned with a 3-by-5 handwritten card. The first two names were scratched out, and Penelope's was the third. "I was right. It was a week before Miss Donne moved in." He gave the exact date. "Why is this important?"

Burns looked at the card. "Zelda Nielsen, Penelope. I think you just helped us solve a mystery, Ralph."

"All right, give," Penelope said.

"There's something in your flat Zelda wants." He saw her astonishment and Ralph's raised, bushy eyebrows. "Okay. It's a theory. I'm betting it's something Elwood hid there. That name rings a bell, Ralph? Henry Elwood?"

The old man thought a moment. "Yes, Miss Nielsen had a boyfriend named Henry. I don't think I ever knew his last name, though. The first is on the card because he had one set of keys. Those two fought a lot, not like you two at all. I think it was him throwing things around at times. He even kicked a hole in the wall once. Did a shoddy job of plastering it over, I dare say. We fixed it up nice for you, Miss Donne."

"Can you show us where that hole used to be?" Harry said.

"Um, I think so."

They followed Ralph back upstairs. In the sitting room, he pointed just to the left of the hallway to the bedrooms, about two feet left of the light switch and a foot above the floor. "Can't see it now because they did such a good repair job."

Ralph returned to the lobby and Burns called Donnell.

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The street in front of Penelope's building was soon filled with police cars and vans. Some irate late-night drivers leaned on their horns but not for long when they saw uniformed constables coming towards them. Instead, they became rubberneckers and created more havoc in the traffic.

"Idiots," Donnell said to the lead SOCO. "I think a lot of our jobs involve protecting them from their own stupidity."

"Long day, Guv?" said the SOCO.

"It was ending nicely with dinner with my wife for a change. Even an ex-copper can ruin an evening."

"Ex-copper?"

"Harry Burns. He's up there with a stalking victim. A good PI if you ever need one, but he can be annoying sometimes. Gather your team and let's go in together. That way I won't wring his neck."

The SOCO laughed.

Upstairs, Donnell confronted Burns.

"I hope you're right about this, Burns, and not wasting our time."

Donnell's SOCOs had removed the monkey's head for later analysis and were now breaking into the wall. They found a valise inside. Donnell sat it on Penelope's dining table and opened it with a penknife. The inside was filled with assorted jewels. Donnell whistled and Burns smiled. He wondered what Donnell would have done if his theory were incorrect. He'd hate to lose a friend.

"I guess that's why we never recovered the jewels from Ellwood's last heist."

"And that's why Zelda wanted you out of the flat," Harry told Penelope.

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Zelda Nielsen had just given a report to Henry Ellwood about her efforts to get Penelope Donne out of the flat. She'd had to suffer through another of his rages about the delay.

"I'll kill that woman! I'll kill that Harry Burns!"

That had caused a few glances from both sides of the wall separating prisoners from visitors and some smiles from the guards who were apparently used to Henry's tantrums and were amused by them. Zelda was glad to leave the visitor center.

She took the creaky lift down to the sterile lobby and walked around the security station where the guards sent ingoing visitors through detectors. She'd about had it with Henry.

"Hello, Ms. Nielsen," Chris Donnell said on her way out the main door. "You're under arrest!"

She had no time to run—not in a prison. She still fought with the two uniformed constables, but they managed to handcuff her.

Donnell read her rights to her under the Crown's law, and they left the prison. He watched the patrol car take her away, along with the knife in her purse as evidence, and then called Burns.

"Got her, Harry. Tell your Penelope her stalker won't be bothering her anymore."

## Epilogue

Lady Clayborn was mother for the tea service. "I'm so glad this sordid affair has been sorted, Mr. Burns."

"Remember: Harry. Harry Burns."

She giggled, "You say that just like Sean Connery as James Bond. After tea, I'll settle your bill."

"No hurry, Violet. I'm happy everything turned out okay.":

"What are your plans, Harry?" Penelope said. "Will you return to Baja California now?"

"You won't have Maria there," Violet said, now taking her seat. "She's fit in here wonderfully, and she and her son are learning English. Doing quite well, to put a fine point on it. I have already hired an immigration barrister to start her paperwork to plead her asylum case, with me as a sponsor, of course. Will that influence your decision?"

"That was a bit sneaky on your part." He said that with a smile, though. "I can't really object. Maria and her son will be a lot safer here in England than in Baja. And I might have to re-evaluate my retirement plans."

"Seems like you're still in the game, Harry," Penelope said with a broad smile. "You should start advertising your services again. I think you can help a lot of people."

"I'll have to admit it felt good to resolve this case. Both Henry Ellwood and Zelda Nielsen will be in jail, Henry a bit longer than the five years he originally received." He smiled at the two women. "I'll have to think about what you said. Say, these tea cakes are terribly good."

"They're Maria's, of course," Violet said. "Penelope knows I can't bake worth a damn."

SAMPLE

**The Teacher**  
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**Preface**

And here's yet another British-style mystery. Some detective inspectors are closer to the people than others, and some of their bosses don't like that. I suppose that can occur in police departments anywhere.

**Chapter One**

DI Marco Ponte had been criticized during the new DCI's first day on the job. At that first meeting with all the detectives—DIs, DSs, and DCs—she'd used him as an example of being too slovenly to face the public. Since then, he'd made an effort, but some boys in the neighborhood that morning got him to kick the ball around a bit before coming to work. Wasn't that what they were supposed to do? Get involved with the community, show everyone that coppers related to the public they protected? He wasn't looking forward to the one-on-one meeting with her that would follow that football match.

She'd continued to criticize him, more so than the other two DIs. He couldn't help that by mid-afternoon on most days his pants were wrinkled and his sports coat looked ready for the dry cleaners, football with the neighborhood kids or not. In one instance, it was about blood from a cut on his cheek caused by a tippler, certainly excusable in his line of work.

That morning he'd made a special effort too. She'd told him the evening before that she needed to talk to him the next morning. That time had come, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

DCI Gina Lawrence responded to his knock with a "Come in." He entered. "Have a seat." She closed a folder and eyed him. "I'm still learning my way around here, Marco. Do you understand that? Do you understand I appreciate results and not failures?"

"I don't understand how still learning your way around in the CID allows you to know what results are successes or failures. I couldn't do that three weeks into a posting. I'd need more time."

He wasn't trying to be confrontational, but he feared she might take what he'd said that way. Frankly, he didn't care anymore. He'd had it. He was ready to find a new posting himself. Maybe up north somewhere.

She smiled, though. "I've read that—" She tapped the folder. "—that you get inventive sometimes, but you mostly produce good results. You're a bit too candid sometimes as well, telling it like it is. And you have a terrible record for your handling of the media."

"That's your task now. We DIs have been doing it out of necessity while we waited for someone to fill the DCI posting."

"I realize that. But don't you think the SIO in an investigation should do it from time to time as well? They're the people who are closest to the investigations."

"Or the SIO should keep the DCI so well informed that she can field any questions the press might throw her way?"

She laughed now. "Whatever. You're SIO on a new case. Enlighten me about how it's going."

"Early days."

He thought a moment, resisting letting out a sigh that there now seemed to be a temporary truce. He then organized other thoughts. Their station in the suburbs also had to cover small villages beyond those; the difference between rural and suburbs often causing him aggro. He was a city lad who'd grown up in a poor London neighborhood, and he had to work hard to understand rural life and its often-unusual criminal cases.

"As often happens, we have plenty of forensics data, but no matches in any of our databases, with HOLMES's, NCA's, MI5's, or Interpol's."

"Seems like your team has done some homework there."

"Looking for the quick impetus. There's no security system or video either. The woman didn't believe in them, and, living away from the city, I can understand that."

"Yes, and I noticed she lived alone. What about friends and relatives? Twenty-plus years of teaching must have produced the former, and she's not so old that close relatives won't be around somewhere. I'm only emphasizing this, mind you, because there were no signs of forced entry."

"Yes, we thought that might mean she knew her killer, so a security system wouldn't have made any difference. We're trying to talk to all the people who knew her. She was a bit of a loner."

"Okay. Keep me informed."

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Marco did what he'd planned to do that morning: Meet with his sergeants *in his office*. They only had two briefing rooms, and they would be occupied by the other two DI's teams that morning. He'd warned the sergeants ahead of time, but others might think it was a reaction to yet another barney with the DCI. Most of his team members hadn't felt the brunt of her criticisms yet, most just wanted to get on with solving the case, and most were busy off tending to their assigned tasks.

"Let's review what we now know," he said. "Kate?"

DS Kate Ahlers nodded. "Constables, DCs as well as uniformed, ours and locals, are canvassing the area. It's a small village, but everyone, except for a few who live in town, is spread out. Patrol cars are needed. We need some time."

"Are service people being visited?"

"She only had a housekeeper that came in three days per week," DS Ted Hubbard said. "I've posted some data about the teacher on the crime board. Her small cottage doesn't allow for a live-in, though I doubt she could afford one. And I guess the plot is small enough not to need a landscaping service. No lawn to speak of. She must have done her own gardening."

"Let's interview the housekeeper anyway. What about relatives?"

Hubbard passed a list to Ahlers and Ponte. It was short. Four of the names corresponded to two uncles and their wives in Poland.

"Elise Cranston was second-generation Polish. Her maiden name was Elise Dabrowski. Her parents have passed on. She has an older brother in Edinburgh who's a priest."

"And she has no children," Ahlers added.

"Or lots of them," Ponte said, "since she was a teacher. Feel like a drive to Scotland, Kate?"

She shrugged. "It's not that far. I can say hi to my aunt too."

"Which is one reason I thought of you." He didn't mention the other: Ahlers took her Catholicism a bit more seriously than he did, and Hubbard was Anglican. "Ted, can you take on the housekeeper? Get on her good side. She might know something that will help us, from being in the cottage all that time. I'll visit the school and talk to the headmaster and the victim's colleagues. I'll also get a list there and check off those I contact. You two might need to help out when you're finished."

"And the canvassing?" Ahlers said.

"I'll stay on it, but I'm not expecting much joy there. Maybe I'll stop and talk with the publican in the village. They usually know everything that's going on."

"We still need a motive," Ahlers said. "I don't think a bad grade for a student will qualify, but you never know."

"Maybe we'll have several possible motives as we progress with the case," Ponte said. "Which reminds me: As we interview people, let's see if they have any form. Do that even before you talk to them, if possible. Let's get to it."

## Chapter Two

"They always wanted me to be a priest and Elise a nun," Ivan Dabrowski, the priest said to Kate. I did my part, but Elise probably did a lot of good work as a teacher, probably more than a nun in a convent ever does, I dare say."

Dabrowski was much older than his sister—Ahlers guessed more than ten years older—and he reminded her of Hollywood portrayals of Robin Hood's friend, Friar Tuck. He had a nice smile, which had disappeared when she told him the bad news, and a jowly face and monkish tonsure. He was in a Church retirement home that made Ahlers think of a monastery with all the priests walking around, the difference being that they represented many orders.

A nun brought them tea service that included two slices of lemon pound cake.

"Do you know if she had any enemies?"

He stirred his tea and thought but finally shook his head. "My little sister was a good person, Sergeant. As you probably know, some Poles aren't good people. There are bad ones there now in our homeland who've turned against God by espousing and practicing autocratic ideas. In World War II, some even lost their souls by letting the Nazis take the Jews away." He took a tentative sip. "Poland more than redeemed himself with the Ukrainian crisis, of course. Our grandparents lived through all that previous history, and maybe they were even part of the problem. Our parents came to England, but they still brought some old customs with them. They weren't all that bad but very strict, especially with Elise." He tapped the silver cross hanging on his neck. "Sometimes old traditions hang around."

"Have you maintained contact with Elise?"

"Good question, considering our age difference. We exchanged Christmas and Easter cards, and she always includes a one- or two-page letter with hers filled with news about her life. We're not close, I dare say; no calls, especially after our parents and her husband passed on. My schedule was always full before I retired, and hers was complicated too, mostly with school activities. About five years ago, she paid me a visit, and we talked about family and old times and a few other things." He looked out the window and seemed lost in memories. "Early onset

Alzheimer's, Sergeant," he said, as if just waking up. "Too prevalent now among us wrinklies." He stood. "Take a walk with me. I see ducks on the pond."

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The retirement home's pond was more a loch without a connection to the sea. They were a bit farther inland than Edinburgh. Ahlers hadn't found it easy to find Elise's brother as a consequence, but the retirement home had a beautiful setting. The pond was a sapphire jewel that reflected the hills beyond. They took seats on a bench and watched the duck families feed along the shore for a while. The priest broke the silence.

"I feel compelled to tell you a secret. My sister was a bit tormented most of her life. She married out of obligation. A Polish woman traditionally is expected either to marry and be a good Catholic by creating lots of new members for the Church or become a nun. Her husband was a fine man, I believe, but she didn't love him, which probably contributed to them not having children. She liked women. Do you know what I mean?"

Ahlers nodded. "How'd you learn this, Father?"

"Long ago. When she was a teenage lass. But she also confessed it to me when she visited. In a sense, I'm betraying the sanctity of the confessional by telling you this, but I do it because it might help you find her killer. It wasn't that long ago that homosexuality was illegal."

"I think the law was stricter with men than women," said Ahlers. "But I'm not a barrister."

"Nor I, and that doesn't matter. It's just a thought I had after you called. You know, looking for reasons why someone would want to kill such a gentle, wonderful person." He smiled a thin smile. "I suppose it's good she didn't become a nun." He looked Ahlers straight in the eye. "Please find her killer, Sergeant. I'm sure she's at peace now, but I'll not be until that happens. I feel evil is at work here."

The rest of their conversation was about the rest home, his earlier life as a priest, and political affairs. Father Dabrowski hadn't been in favor of Brexit and was not in favor of Scottish independence either. Of course, he wasn't Scottish, so maybe that didn't count too much?

### Chapter Three

"Mrs. Cranston was a wonderful woman," the housekeeper, Anne Tilson, told Hubbard. She'd prepared tea service for the two of them, strong tea and delicious cakes, which made the trip to her tiny cottage in a working-class enclave just outside the village worthwhile for Hubbard, even if he didn't learn anything that would help the investigation.

"What was Mr. Cranston like?"

"Not a bad sort, from what I heard. Never knew the bloke. The big C got him."

"Cancer." She nodded, although it hadn't been a question.

"Lung cancer, to put a fine point on it. The missus said he smoked like a Mancunian factory. Can't say all that fertilizer did him any good either." Seeing Hubbard's quizzical expression, she explained. "Old fellow worked in a garden supply center in the next village over, the missus said. Where they went to church. Probably breathed in insecticide dust as well. Folks around here pay more attention to their gardens than the government's taxes. Which one's worse, I've no idea."

"Seems like you talked to her a lot."

"Often enough. The dear sometimes even helped me in my chores. Didn't tell me how to do'em, but she pitched in sometimes. Guess we were 'bout the same age. When we took a break, we'd have our tea and cakes and a jolly old chinwag."

"So, you got along. Do you know if anyone ever threatened her?"

"Obviously someone had it in fer her! Enough to kill her. Can't imagine her hurting a fly, though. Once we had a mouse in the basement, a lil' field mouse, he was. I was going to swat the little pest with a broom, but she caught it and drove it to a field somewhere and let it go. She was sweet like that."

"So, no arguments with anyone in the area?"

"Only ones I saw were with my good-for-nothing husband. Sometimes he'd come to pick me up, often pickled enough to be in a jar. She'd threaten to report him. In confidence, mind you, because the old dog's still scratchin' his fleas, she told me to throw the old tippler out." She pointed to a large bruise on her arm, now mostly green, not purple. "Last pawing from the old dog. He'd hit me sometimes. On those rides home, she was afraid he'd get into an accident with me in the car. 'Twas the way she was...always caring. I'm sure her students loved her."

"No troubles at school then, from students, parents, or fellow teachers?"

"Seeing the way some of the young are so wild these days, with parents letting them do most anything, you'd think both students and parents would try her patience. Never heard of any incidents, though."

"Sometimes widows remarry," Hubbard said. "Did she have any suitors? Any fellows coming around?"

"Only the vicar, and he was always with that crazy wife of his, so no romance there. I'd guess she wouldn't want to go through losing another husband."

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They drove to the scene of the crime, Elise Crantston's cottage, which wasn't much larger than Mrs. Tilson's, although the lot was slightly larger. Hubbard hadn't been there, only Ahlers and Ponte.

The foyer wasn't much more than a hallway that led to a sitting room that looked out upon a back garden. A large dark stain was in the center of an area rug.

"She was right there on the floor. Still trying to figure out how to remove the blood stain, I am." She fell into a wing chair; for a moment, he thought she'd fainted. "'Twas awful, Sergeant Hubbard. Like a husk of a person. The poor soul was gone. And oh! Those vacant eyes! Good lord!"

"Did you try to revive her?"

"No. I knew she was gone. When I finished with you plods, I drove to the church to pray for her soul" She glared at him. "You must find the evil person who did that to her!"

"We'll do our best, Mrs. Tilson. Mind if I take a look around?"

"Those other plods went all through her house but go ahead. I'll wait here, if you don't mind. Too many memories. She had some nice things, but you'll see there was nothing really worth stealing. She was just a lovely, simple person, she was. No airs 'bout her at all."

"You'd be the best person to know if anything was stolen. Was an inventory taken with you?"

"That other sergeant and the family liaison officer went with me through the house after those evidence blokes finished sniffing 'round. Hello to them, by the way. Nice women they



were." She thought a moment. "'Cept for the broken French door there, nothing was awry or missing. I never snooped around, you see, but I noticed things as I cleaned. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, I work somewhere else. Those other twits, now they're just asking for some thief to pay them a visit. Tellys in every room almost, game consoles, computers—makes you wonder how the old wiring holds up."

"Did she have a computer?"

"One of those laptops. The evidence blokes took it. When I went 'round with the female plods, I did notice Elise had some new dresses I'd not seen before. She was mostly a sweatpants and shirt and trainers lady, but she had to shop for clothes from time to time for her teaching position, so I suppose she did that the day she..." The woman gulped and wiped away some tears. "...died."

"I see. I'll take a look around and then drive you home."

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The cottage's plan featured the sitting room, a small dining room off the kitchen, and a small WC just left upon entering the backdoor; two bedrooms and another WC were on the second floor. It was a modest home and probably all that Elise Cranston had needed, even when her husband was living because they had no children.

Tucked into an alcove in one bedroom was a small desk, and one wall of that room had bookcases covered with books. Hubbard perused some of the titles. Most were non-fiction, probably reference works, but there were some fiction titles as well. He sampled a couple and smiled. One was a generic bodice-ripper; the other a lesbian romance set in the Middle Ages. Neither sample was anything he would ever read.

He saw the dresses in the other bedroom's closet; they still had their price tags. Apparently the SOCOs didn't think the killer would have handled them. They probably didn't think he'd even been on the second floor, but surely, they would have gone over it to be complete.

Elise Cranston's death looked like a revenge killing, not a heist gone wrong. The problem was: Who killed her...and why?

## Chapter Four

Headmaster Arthur Little received Ponte after he threaded his way through halls and past flirtatious lasses and suspicious lads and then passed inspection by a Viking warrior-woman intent on protecting the great man from anyone possibly aggressive. *Especially irate parents?* Ponte asked himself as she ushered him down yet another hall to Little's large office.

The headmaster came around his desk and shook Ponte's hand after the inspector flashed his warrant card once again.

"Please have a seat," Little said, indicating a choice between two equal chairs in front of the desk. He returned to his own desk chair, which looked more expensive and comfortable than the one Ponte's DCI had. "I assume this visit is about Elise Cranston. We're still grieving."

He didn't look like he was grieving, but Ponte knew some men could hide their emotions well.

"This visit is purely routine, sir, and it's designed to give me a better sense of Mrs. Cranston's background: How well she fit in here, in her colleagues' words; whether you and the

other staff, parents, or students, had problems with her, or she had with them; and so forth. She worked here for a long time, so there might be a lot of her history I don't know."

"Our perceptions are probably useless for your investigation, Inspector, because everyone here will tell you she was an exceptional maths teacher and got along with everyone." He counted on his fingers, which made Ponte smile. "She worked well under four headmasters, including me—that's a long time as you stated. When I came to Admiral Nelson Secondary, she could have run the school better than I could at the time. In fact, she helped me a lot to adapt to this new position, as did some of the other older staff. I was adapting to life in a small village as well. All a big change for me."

Ponte was surprised that the man admitted that. *Perhaps my initial perception was wrong? Or did the Viking mislead me?* "What courses did she teach exactly?"

"Algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus. To keep the teachers in each department from falling into a rut, we rotate them through the list of courses they're responsible for. Of course, they often take refresher courses outside terms to keep up to date too, mostly on good pedagogical praxis. As you might expect from the size of the school, we serve a wide area, not just the village. We're a quality secondary establishment, and many of our students have later success in college studies. The area is full of ex-city dwellers who moved out of the city to have a bigger house and raise their children. Those parents can be demanding."

Part of his litany sounded a bit like a telly ad for the school to Ponte, and it fit better with Ponte's initial perception of Little. "Most students liked Mrs. Cranston?" The headmaster nodded. "Parents?"

Again, there was a nod, but also a comment: "For the more advanced courses, few parents can help with homework, so Elise and others would run after-school sessions to fill that tutoring role. I believe she even did some tutoring in her house."

"Fellow teachers get along with her?"

"No problems there either. Please understand that there's very little turnover among the staff. We get together during the end-of-year holidays, and the teachers often socialize other times too. We're one big, happy family."

"Pub sessions?" He'd seen the local driving through with Hubbard.

He smiled. "Sometimes. Elise had some close friends, other teachers and their spouses, which is common enough. Mates, to use the vernacular. They'd hit the village pub from time to time, especially on Friday evenings."

"What about you and Elise? Did you two get along?"

"Different generations, Inspector, as far as socializing goes." He smiled again. "Moreover, I must maintain a bit of distance from the staff, so I'm sure some teachers consider me anti-social. I have a professional relationship with all my teachers and often attend departmental meetings. There are a few little changes in approved curriculum from year to year, but generally speaking, everything marches along smoothly."

"So, you weren't close?" Ponte said, cutting through that "professional detachment."

"No. Or more at the beginning, when I arrived here, with Elise and a few other senior staff. With Elise, mutual respect, I dare say." He laughed. "I'm certainly not able to teach calculus—couldn't even if I wanted to do so."

*So humble*, thought Ponte. "Can you think of any enemies Mrs. Cranston might have had? Whether here or elsewhere?"

"None. Everyone liked her. As I said, she socialized with some teachers and would hit the pub with them once and a while. You're better off querying them about her village life."

"Could you provide me with a list of those mates, the ones who knew her best?"

"Of course."

"And, if possible, could I interview them now, if there aren't too many?"

"I suppose, if they aren't in class. Let's get that sorted. You can do your interviews in the library."

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Before Ponte even got to the first teacher, a young girl approached him in the library.

"Are you the copper investigating my teacher's death?"

The question made Ponte think that he'd missed something in indicating the first steps of the investigation: Talking to students. He thought Ahlers would be better for that, though, so they could do a follow-up at the school.

"Detective Inspector Marco Ponte, at your service," he said with a smile.

"Hi. I'm Dora. I'm in her trig class. She's the best teacher I ever had. Please find who killed her."

"We'll do our best. Did you know her well?" He couldn't remember any fellow student being close to a teacher in his London secondary, but village schools might be different.

"She gave me special tutoring sessions in geometry at her home," Dora said, "and her housekeeper, Mrs. Tilson, gave us lovely cakes and tea that helped me get through them." She sat in the chair by Ponte and whispered, "And Mrs. Cranston helped me through some personal problems too."

"I suppose good teachers often do that. I hope she resolved them for you."

He couldn't tell whether Dora was there to flirt with him like some of the girls he'd seen coming into the school, or she just wanted to urge him to find Elise's killer because she was such a wonderful teacher.

"Oh, she did. I'm now okay with my sexuality. No more guilt." She blushed a bright pink. "I even have a girlfriend now. We're planning to go to Oxford together. I want to study maths; she's interested in history."

Ponte was a bit embarrassed by that confession, an embarrassment exacerbated by his previous wondering if some flirtation with an older person, a copper, wasn't occurring. "I'm happy that Mrs. Cranston could help you, but why are you telling me this?"

"Just because you should know how unfair it is that someone killed her. She really helped people. She even told Jimmy Rowland about a new treatment for acne at the NHS. She was like that, always helping people." Again, she leaned forward and whispered, "I think she was seeing someone, Inspector Ponte. One day when Mrs. Tilson wasn't there, I arrived early and saw a car pulling away."

"How long ago was that? And could you see the driver?"

"When she tutored me in geometry, so about six months ago, I guess. I could see the driver but not well enough to determine whether it was a man or woman." She winked at him.

"I'm guessing it was a man. She was a widower after all, a real stunner even as an older woman."

She jumped up and skipped away, leaving Ponte wondering about a young girl's perception of the adult world and whether Elise Cranston was a saint.

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The first teacher to arrive to be interviewed was Sally Madison, a history teacher. She was a bubbly woman with red, curly hair and blue eyes, more like a schoolgirl than a teacher.

"You're Italian, aren't you, Inspector?" she said after introductions.

"I was born in London, so I think of myself as English, but my father was Italian and my mother French. Why do you ask?"

"Your last name, Ponte. It's Italian. Like Ponte Vecchio in Florence? Built in 1345 over the Arno River there. I teach European history. Florence played a major role as a city-state. The Medici family, for example."

"Interesting. Tell me about Elise."

"That's German. Like 'Für Elise,' that piece by Beethoven."

"I meant your friend Elise, your relationship with her."

"Yes, of course." She made a moue. "Terrible, terrible. Why do the good die young?"

"Did she have any enemies, men in her life, and so forth?"

"Um, we'd hit the pub sometimes, and a few times she became moody. Thinking about her husband, I suppose? He was a good man, but you'd think she'd just have moved on. Donkey's years since she lost him, you know."

"She wasn't happy?"

"A bit glum sometimes, she was, just now and then, but I'd say she was happy enough with her lot in life in general. We have to cope, don't we?"

"Anyone dislike her?"

"No one I knew, not enough to kill her. Um, she thought the young headmaster is a bit too pedantic, but that's a common enough opinion. He takes things too seriously at times, including himself. But I think the prat respected her. Elise was bright and a lot of fun, especially with a few pints to mellow her out. Can't say anyone disliked her. Certainly not in our little cadre of teachers, and the students loved her. Carla has some students who are troublemakers, for example, but most of them don't take advanced maths—they're too lazy and don't apply themselves. They get that way when their parents are a bit high and mighty."

"Who's Carla?"

"Carla Ramirez. She teaches French, Italian, and Latin."

"Students have to learn all those languages?" Ponte knew some words and expressions from the first two, but he'd never studied a language in secondary.

She giggled. "Heavens no! They choose one language...or their parents choose for them. We also offer German and Spanish. Despite Brexit, we're still part of Europe, Inspector."

"I see." Ponte was now wondering why Latin was taught if that was the modern reason for taking a language. He was getting tired of the interview with this bubbly teacher. "Please send in the next teacher."

Four women followed, then two men. One of the men, Robert Meadows, was definitely the nervous type. Ponte wrote the nerves off to what often happened when civilians talked to a copper. Meadows taught chemistry. Ponte made him more nervous by asking about men in Elise's life, remembering Dora's whispered comment.

"No suitors that I know of," Meadows said. "Elise was a lot of fun, so I don't know why not. Maybe she didn't want to lose another husband? A few in our little group are unmarried. My wife tells me that's more common than people think among female schoolteachers."

"Who's your wife, sir? Is she a teacher?"

"You just met her. Carla Ramirez. She kept her maiden name."

"I see." Ponte thought it a bit unusual that the vivacious Carla would have married an old stick like Meadows, but Ponte was far from being an authority on relationships. He'd never had much success with his own. Maybe Carla just wanted to be sure her husband wouldn't have a wandering eye?

He went through his litany of questions once again.

By the time he finished with Elise's mates, Ponte decided he needed to reward himself with a pint at the local pub. He'd talk to the publican next.

## Chapter Five

While the school was on the outskirts of the village, it was still near the pub in the center. The Fox and Hare was a typical English pub that had given in only a little to 21st century tastes. A large-screen telly on the wall behind the publican displayed a European soccer game, but the sound was low and the man behind the bar wasn't paying attention. He probably knew that a good ale or lager interested most customers more, so that late afternoon the publican was preparing for those few loners who ate their dinners there and the clients who'd come in looking for conversation and relaxation, males and females alike. *Not necessarily different groups*, Ponte thought, thinking of his own lifestyle.

He ordered a pint of ale and a cheese-and-tomato sandwich. When the publican pulled the pint and served him, Ponte showed him Elise Cranston's photo on his mobile. "Ever see this woman?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Who's asking?" Ponte showed him his warrant card. "A bit far from home, aren't you, Inspector?"

"Your village is in our jurisdiction. Your local constables are, in fact, my colleagues. I'd appreciate it if you'd answer my question."

"Don't tie your underwear in a knot, old stick. I'd rather talk to them, but our local plods probably couldn't do well with Mrs. Cranston's murder, so I'm happy to collaborate. Elise's been here more than a few times, I dare say. I'd consider her a regular. Nice widow woman. Had me eye on her a bit, you see, but she didn't flirt too much. Some of her mates did, but not her. Shame someone killed her. Knew her husband more, poor man. The good die young. First him, then her."

"When she was here, was she always with her mates?"

"Comes in with them often enough. Hen parties mostly, although sometimes a few fellows tag along, especially on Fridays. A couple of times that snotty headmaster gives them company, mixing like oil in water. That's usually for holidays and end of terms. I'd be celebrating the last as well. Students must be hard to take by the end of a term, don't you think?"

"Nothing more than work groups then?"

"Um, now that you mention it, the last month or two, she's here with the vicar's crazy wife, just the two of them. Quite chummy those two." He leaned towards Ponte. "You didn't hear it from me, but I saw them kissing back in one of the back booths once. A bit weird that, but maybe they're cousins or something. Not my business to care, and I don't know the vicar well enough to ask. I'm a Catholic, so I go to the church in the next village if I go at all."

"And you wouldn't know Mrs. Cranston well enough to say whether she has any enemies here or not, I suppose?"

"There was a bit of a barney between her and that young headmaster once. He was getting a bit too chummy with one of the younger teachers, if you know what I mean, and I think

that woman's married. Mrs. Cranston told the damn prat off, and he threatened to fire them both. Everyone else in the group enjoyed the night after he stormed out."

So far, all the information was matching what he'd learned at the school, except for the story about the vicar's wife and the confrontation with Little. They'd have to follow up on both of those, but he suspected that would come to nothing. He'd seen female friends and relatives embrace and kiss each other. Of course, most of his relatives were either French or Italian! And the barney with the headmaster might have been exaggerated by the publican?

He'd had enough of small village life for the day, so he was annoyed when Hubbard called and said he'd be late for their meeting at the same pub.

*My sergeant's probably hungry, so I have to wait for my ride back.*

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Ponte had long ago finished his sandwich and was working on another pint when Hubbard finally appeared.

"I heard from Ahlers," he said after sliding into the booth opposite his DI, "indirectly. She's on her way back, but she put a report into the system."

"Let's get to that after we share what we've learned."

"You go first. But wait while I get some sustenance and liquid refreshment."

Ponte smiled. "Go ahead. Grab me some munchies if they have them. I'm trying to avoid desserts."

"Yeah. Those tarts looked awfully good. You can knock village life all you want, Guv, but home cooking is always a plus for me."

When Hubbard returned with his own pint and food, Ponte went over what he'd learned while his sergeant put away enough for two blokes. They then switched roles over coffee. By the second cups, the pieces of the jigsaw, at least one theory, started to come together, especially after Hubbard added a piece from Ahler's report. Ponte took Hubbard's mobile and read through it completely.

"Can we use evidence divulged to a priest in a confession?" Ponte said.

Hubbard smiled. "Might be hard to put the old priest on the stand in Crown Court, but he gave the information up willingly. It's another bit to support what we're thinking, right?"

The theory wasn't one Ponte was happy with: Was Elise Cranston a closet lesbian who was having an affair with the vicar's wife?

"It fits all the facts of the case," Ponte said, "but it seems like homophobic nonsense. Yet it also explains why Elise could relate to Dora's problem."

Ponte had edited the report on his school visit a bit to keep Dora out of it, but now he explained who Dora was.

"Makes sense. Elise had lived through Dora's problem, so she knew what advice to give."

"I think we need to visit the vicar and his wife now," Ponte said.

"What about the barney with the headmaster? A threat to fire a teacher with her seniority is a bit over the top."

Ponte shook his head. "In neither instance, would it seem that the persons involved had enough motivation to kill Elise, but you never know how people take things." He looked at his watch. "Eight-ten. I'd guess the vicar and his wife are through with dinner."

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"Ben ate first so he could pay a visit to old Mrs. Hunt, who's in the hospital," Brenda Davies, the vicar's wife told them. "He'll be along for dessert soon, I hope. Meanwhile, I'll cut four smaller pieces of cake instead of two large ones and make some coffee."

While Ponte thought that offer sounded good, he'd need to make room for more coffee because he needed the caffeine. He asked for a WC.

"Straight up the stairs, door in the middle of the landing."

While Brenda was busy in the kitchen, Hubbard wandered around the sitting room looking at pictures, and Ponte did his business and then did the same thing upstairs. The only item that gave him pause was the shotgun propped up in the corner of one bedroom that had obviously become the vicar's study; it was loaded. *To fight off the heathens?* he thought with a smile. He went back downstairs.

During his absence, Hubbard had noticed a photo of Brenda and her new husband, probably taken just after their wedding. She looked a lot happier than he did, and old Ben looked to be about ten years older than his wife.

They barely had time to share their findings when Brenda reappeared with the coffee service. Hubbard immediately attacked the cake.

"How long have you been married to the vicar?" Ponte asked Brenda after the coffee was poured and some pleasantries were exchanged.

"For a little more than ten years. Both boys are now in private schools, so my life is a bit empty now."

Ponte thought that was a strange answer. "I guess it happened a bit early for you two, but parents often feel that way when fledglings leave the nest. Some parents have to get to know each other again, I dare say."

"Oh, Ben keeps busy with his flock, as he calls his congregation, so it affects me more, Inspector."

He nodded. "So, you and Elise commiserated; you'd lost your husband somewhat to his work and missed your sons, and she'd lost hers completely." It was her turn to nod. "Enough to lead you to intimacy?"

That's when Brenda fell apart. "It just happened. I've always had doubts...you know...getting into it with Ben. The boys were worth it—they're wonderful lads, you know—but it was always...you know...so mechanical. My Christian duty, so to speak." She shuddered and wiped away tears with a lace handkerchief. "Elise explained that what had happened to me had happened to her. But intimacy, Inspector? No, never. Just a mutual understanding of what we'd missed. We understood that we'd lost something in our lives."

"How did Ben feel about that revelation?"

She looked shocked and turned white, then bright red. "He doesn't know! Don't ever mention it to him! It has nothing to do with Elise's murder."

*Maybe, maybe not.* "Are you sure about that? What might your husband have done if he believed you had an intimate relationship with Elise?"

"Ben would probably think his career was ruined and divorce me."

"You forgot his attachment to his sons," Hubbard said between mouthfuls. "The female spouse often gets the kids."

"And all that added together might be more painful to him than eliminating Elise," Ponte said.

"Never! Ben would never do that! And he didn't know, so it's all moot. There was no intimate relationship with Elise. We just shared regrets!"

"If you never discussed this with him, how can you be sure about what his reaction would be?"

Ponte almost regretted the question, thinking Brenda was about to have a nervous breakdown. Instead, she became defiant.

"You're—you're just trying to close your case. Ben is *not* a murderer!"

At that moment, they heard someone at the front door; keys jangled. "I'm home, Brenda," a cheery voice said. "Sorry I had to run off."

The vicar stopped at the entrance to the sitting room when he saw his wife was with two strange men.

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"These two police officers are here about Elise," Brenda explained to her husband.

The vicar entered the room and introductions with a shaking of hands occurred. He took a seat on the sofa next to his wife.

"Although Elise wasn't an Anglican, she seemed like a very nice person," he offered. "I'd run across her and her mates at the pub sometimes. It's all very sad."

*One pub in a village, thought Ponte, and it becomes the center of village life.* It was like living in a Jane Austen novel to him. An old flame had bored him almost to tears with her blather and twaddle about Jane Austen.

"Any other contacts with Mrs. Cranston sir?" Ponte said.

"Oh, you know, at the grocer's, the chemist's, and the like. I can't say I knew her as well as I know the steadfast members of our congregation, though. I understand she and her husband went to church in the next village, but she didn't regularly attend after her husband passed on."

"Brenda was telling me she and Elise were good friends. I'd like to hear why you think that is, since Elise didn't attend your services."

Ben laughed. "Brenda is out and about in this same village more often than I am. I'm often working in my study. Being a vicar is just like any other full-time job. Even late hours sometimes, like tonight."

"A lot more rewarding than some jobs, I suppose." Ponte stood; Hubbard seconded him. "We'll bid you a good evening. Thank you for the coffee and cake, Brenda. I'm afraid we might have eaten your dessert sir."

"No problem. Coppers are always hungry, and my waistline doesn't need the extra calories."

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"What did he mean by that last comment?" Hubbard said once they were in the car.

"You mean the first part?" Hubbard nodded. "Maybe he saw what you'd already had for dinner. Let's see if we can talk to the headmaster again."

He pulled out the fancy business card and his mobile and called the school. The call auto-transferred to a phone that was answered by the Viking. Ponte recognized the stentorian voice. She said the headmaster was off to an important meeting in the city and wouldn't return until the next week. She was fielding all his school calls and wouldn't give Ponte the mobile number.



"A bit protective, isn't she?" Hubbard said.

Ponte eyed his tall, lanky sergeant. "She could stomp you into the ground and make you into pat  . Let's head home and regroup. Our leads have vanished. The headmaster obviously didn't fire Elise, which would be a lot less drastic than murdering her, and he seemed to be a reasonable bloke despite his ego. The vicar might have known about Elise and Brenda but also knew there was no intimacy. Why kill her? We need some other suspects."

"And maybe some stronger motives," Hubbard said, turning the ignition.

Before they left the village proper, Ponte said, "Let's stop in and visit the local constables to say hello and thank them for helping with the canvassing."

"Good idea. We were once in their shoes."

"They're not young, Hubbard, but they're dedicated and part of village life. They're needed in these small villages."

Isaac Schultz and Henry Windom were jolly fellows who seemed right pleased to see them.

After summarizing how the case stood so far, Windom said, "So what are the next steps, Guv? We can't just turn the teacher's murder into a cold case, can we?"

"No," Ponte said. "Keep your eyes and ears open, gentlemen. You two are our men in the field here. We can only find the murderer with your help."

That chuffed them a bit. The two waved them off, and Ponte waved back, wondering if he'd ever see them again. Local constables were the force's foundation in the rural areas; he hoped Ahlers and Hubbard realized that.

## Chapter Six

Ponte was reviewing the entire case in his office when the sergeant who worked the station's reception desk called.

"Important call, Guv, line 5."

It was Schultz, the village constable. He was panting. "Major development, Inspector Ponte. We think the vicar's wife just committed suicide."

Ponte didn't believe it, but it seemed like a classic case after the constable's brief description of the car in the garage.

"Control the crime scene, Isaac. We'll be there in blues and twos as soon as we can. I'll send our pathologist and SOCOs too. Don't let anyone in that garage."

Ponte dashed out of his office and called out, "Ahlers, Hubbard! We might have another murder in the village! Meet at Hubbard's car."

He was in the passenger's seat waiting when Ahlers and Hubbard ran out of the station. *En route* to the motorway, he called the pathologist and SOCOs. During the ride, he told his sergeants what Schultz had reported.

"I can't imagine the vicar's wife being suicidal, Guv," Hubbard said. "Something's not right."

"Agreed."

"I never met her," Ahlers said from the backseat, "but she wasn't even a suspect, right?"

"Not after talking to her and the vicar," Ponte said. "I could be wrong, but I don't believe she was lying to us. Too much rang true. Elise and Brenda just felt the same regrets about not coming out earlier. Different times back then when they were young teenagers."

"That's very perceptive, Guv," Ahlers said.

"I might not understand homosexual tendencies, Kate, but I respect people's choices. Love is beautiful wherever you may find it."

"That's almost poetic, Guv," Hubbard said. "Percy Shelley in Italy, like, if you weren't a copper."

"Stuff it, Sergeant," Ponte said with a smile.

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They arrived long before the pathologist and SOCOs, so Ahlers and Hubbard donned booties and gloves to make a cursory inspection of the victim and garage to confirm the constables' story.

"Where's the vicar?" Ponte said to Windom.

"In the vicarage, Guv, drinking heavily. Can't say I blame him, sir."

"I'll go talk to him. Please help out here as needed. You two have done a good job."

Ponte went in through the vicarage's open front door and joined the vicar in the sitting room.

"That won't help, sir," he said as the man tossed down half a glass of an amber liquid before recognizing Ponte.

The vicar looked at the glass and then put it down on the table beside him. "Liquid courage, Inspector, but you're right. It's probably a waste of good scotch. What am I going to do?"

"You certainly know the story of Job sir. Consider all of this a test of your faith." *You should be talking*, Ponte thought. He found it a bit amusing that he was sermonizing to a vicar.

"The boys, I mean. They will never understand."

"Do you? If so, enlighten me. Why would Brenda commit suicide?"

He now took a long sip from the glass. "We never had a happy marriage, you see. She loved Elise Cranston."

"So, you knew?"

"Yes!" Whatever state he'd been in had turned to anger. "Elise was an abomination, a freak created by the Devil! Both of them were! Having a lesbian relationship behind my back, the two."

"You're wrong about that, Ben. She and Elise were only commiserating; they shared the same regrets. They had no intimate relationship."

"I saw them meeting. Disgusting behavior. Hugging, kissing. I assumed...."

"You assumed incorrectly, reverend."

At that moment, Ahlers entered, sat beside Ponte, and whispered in his ear. "There are restraining marks on Brenda's wrists. He must have removed the ropes before the constables arrived."

Ponte eyed the vicar. "You were wrong, Ben, and you killed your wife, didn't you? As well as Elise?"

The vicar stared unseeingly at them for a moment. He then jumped up and ran upstairs. They heard a door slam.

When they got there, they found the study door locked. They then heard the shot.

They heard one of the constables burst in through the vicarage's backdoor. Shultz soon joined them upstairs.

"Constable, I'm going to ask you to use your rugby-sized hulk to break this bedroom door open."

Schultz took a few steps and put his shoulder against the door, almost falling into the room. "Oh, shite!"

Ahlers and Ponte moved around him to see the terrible mess. The vicar still had the shotgun between his legs. Half his head was gone.

"My Lord!" Ahlers said. "Remind me to never move out to a village. This is the worst I've ever seen."

Ponte nodded. "And I consider it a confession. The vicar killed both Elise and Brenda. *C'est fini!*"

## Epilogue

Ponte knocked on his DCI's office door.

"Come in, Marco. Have a seat." She'd been at her computer behind her desk, but she swiveled around to face him with a smile. "That was a nice bit of investigative work. You do get results."

"I had a lot of help. It's a team effort."

"And you have a good team. An odd case. We ended up with no one to charge, and three people are dead." She thought a moment. "I might have slipped up, according to Susan. I shared the results with her. I wanted to get her take on the case."

"I was careful. It's not like the old days, you know. That old law was so wrong in so many ways. Alan Turing was a national hero; he shouldn't have been a victim. Oscar Wilde was a great dramatist. Et cetera."

"If it's any comfort, you handled it just fine, according to Susan. We're just sorry for those women. When you write your final report, tone it down a bit. They were victims in many ways. Susan could have helped them, I dare say."

"Who's Susan?"

"She's a psychologist who works for the NCA as a profiler. She's also my partner."

Ponte contained his surprise. "Yes, I think she might have helped Elise and Brenda a lot when they were young, but if Susan is your age, she wouldn't have been available then. I don't think she could have helped the vicar, who was the real problem."

The DCI sighed. "I suppose you're right. It's all rather sad, isn't it?"

"Agreed. I'm not at all happy about how the case ended. And as fast as we ended it, it wasn't soon enough to save the two."

She spun around again to confront her computer again. He took that as a dismissal and let himself out, never seeing the DCI's tears.

## **The Director**

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#### **Preface**

It's fun to write a story about a murder associated with a play. Actors make good murder suspects because they...well, they know how to act as if they're innocent. So, a detective can always wonder who's acting and who isn't. This British-style mystery has that as a theme.

#### **Chapter One**

Inspector Maxwell Blunt was actually enjoying the play. He normally wasn't a fan of local theater, but that evening the amateur actors were doing a good job with the comedy, which he thought was always more challenging than a drama. His appreciation was helped along because he had a pleasant companion sitting to the left of him, Dr. Katherine Winslow, who giggled and laughed, forgetting for a while her job as forensic pathologist. Outside these few social functions she dragged him to, she helped him and his CID colleagues solve crimes.

The play had reached the point where the main character was stumbling around in a dark room only lit by neon signs seen outside the fake windows. He was looking for his keys so he could go on a hot date—not particularly funny per se, but the places where he searched for them brought many laughs. As he was spinning around, suddenly a loud scream overwhelmed the audience's giggles and laughter and reverberated around the small theater. A woman dressed in sweatshirt, jeans, and trainers ran onto the stage.

"Someone's murdered Nick! Call the police!"

Blunt, who had an aisle seat, jumped up and called out, "Don't bother! I'm Inspector Blunt. I am the police!"

He moved towards the stage; the doctor followed him.

"Max, maybe it's part of the show!"

"Nonsense!" he said over his shoulder. "That scream couldn't be part of a comedy."

When he arrived at the stage's edge, he looked up at the woman and said, "Where's this Nick bloke?"

"Come-come up by-by the stairs on your right and-and follow me back-backstage."

When Blunt saw the body, he knew no ambulance was required. There was a dagger buried in the left side of the victim's chest. It was all Kathy's domain now, but COD was clear and Max had a good estimate of TOD as well.

"I'll call the SOCOs and Ben."

"Have someone get my bag from my Rover on the way in," Winslow said. She'd slipped out of her high heels, put her jacket on a piano, and was now crouched over the body. "Um, when did you last see the victim alive, Luv?" she said to the woman, who was wringing her hands and seemed ready to collapse.

"When he argued with Clark."

"Who's Clark?" said Blunt.

"Clark Ogleby, the chemist. He plays the main character in the play. You saw him onstage when I came out."

There was a murmur behind Blunt. He turned and saw the rubberneckers—actors, stagehands, audience members, all curious onlookers. He needed his sergeant to get things under control, but now it was his chore. He walked towards them.

"We need to give the victim and the police pathologist some privacy here. Please return to the auditorium and find seats. As soon as possible, we will take all your statements, after which you can go home. The play is over."

"Is this a homicide case?" a young bloke holding a mobile up high said.

Blunt sensed the prat was a reporter. "I'm not answering that yet, and if you're snapping pics and phoning them and your uneducated guesses into some media outlet, I'll confiscate your mobile."

The lad put the mobile in a pants pocket and joined the others who were returning to their seats.

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With DS Ben Davies and two DCs controlling audience, actors, and stagehands, all taking statements, Blunt felt he could take time to interview the woman who'd found the victim. She was now sitting atop a stool and hugging herself.

"Tell me about this Nick," he said to her. "Your name and his to start, please."

"I'm Tess Nolan, the props and costumes manager. Nick Tandy is the director. He's a dentist, but he was in theater productions in college as an actor, so he knows how it's done." She turned pale again. "Was a dentist, I suppose I should say."

"All past tense now, I'm afraid, Miss Nolan."

"Mrs. Nolan. I married Nick's office partner, Peter Nolan."

"I see. Tell me about Nick. Did he have any enemies? Someone who received a bad crown or implant perhaps?"

He saw the scolding look Kathy flashed at him. *I'm just lightening the mood*, he thought, so he winked at her. She then went about her business again because Ben had brought her bag into the theater. She and the SOCOs were now trying to keep out of each other's way.

"Not at all," Tess said. "Nick was a gentle soul, nary a spat with anyone, including patients. He was always helping people."

"Is there a Mrs. Tandy?"

She laughed. "No, he's gay and has no full-time partner. Um, was gay."

"That's probably enough for a homophobe to become an enemy."

"This is the twenty-first century, Inspector."

"And that damn law was annulled not that long ago. By the way, in case you haven't noticed, our village here, although larger than most, isn't London. People here might not be so accepting as in the city."

She shrugged. "It never hurt the dental practice. Patients showed no preference for my husband."

"Is the practice part of NHS?"

"No, it's a private practice, although Nick and Peter would often refer patients needing oral surgery to NHS."

Blunt nodded. That made sense. "How long have you, your husband, and Mr. Tandy lived in the area?"

"Only about five years."

"Hardly enough time to make serious enemies then, unless they've had some serious barneys with the Fox and Hound's clientele."

A thin, anemic smile. "No confrontations there, just arguments about cricket, football, and rugby."

"Two Central American countries once went to war over football. What about old enemies? Before Mr. Tandy came here?"

She shrugged again. "How would I know? I met both Nick and Peter in amateur theater. We were just college chums. Now I'm a nurse still with a taste for theater."

"I see. Is the murder weapon one of your props?"

The sudden change in the interrogation flustered her. "Heavens no! I-we only use stage props, rubber daggers, swords without sharp edges, and so forth."

"So, you've never seen the murder weapon before?"

"I'd have to examine it. It looks ornate. We do have a museum here that has a medieval weapons section."

"We'll get to that eventually. How did you happen to discover Nick's body?"

"I came backstage to get a glass of water for Arline. The glasses are plastic, by the way, though they're meant to look like crystal."

"Who's Arline?"

"Arline Rogers. She's Clark's girlfriend in the play. She throws water in his face at one point. When I saw Nick, I screamed."

"And do you remember why Nick was arguing with Clark?"

"That occurred before the play began, outside, just through the backdoor there." She smiled now, though the smile was weak. "Clark didn't want to wear the red suspenders I'd provided. Nick thought they were an integral part of the costume and would get a few laughs."

"Doesn't seem like much to argue about."

"I agree, but Clark Oglesby can be a bit stubborn sometimes."

Blunt handed her his card. "Just in case you can think of anything else that will help us in our investigation."

"Can I go home now? My husband's probably worried. I bet this is in all the news now, thanks to Ralphie."

"Ralphie? The bloke with the moby?"

"Yes, Ralph Brothers. He's a free-lancer, so he sends things out all over the place. We met him in the Fox and Hound a while ago."

Blunt memorized the reporter's name. He liked to know who the members of the media were, mostly because he preferred to avoid them.

## Chapter Two

Blunt had anticipated that taking statements from actors, stagehands, and audience members would be a waste of time. Tess's information was all they had, and that clearly had pointed to Nick Tandy's past life beyond the local theater as their new focus, simply by elimination.

They had to cover all the bases. While the constables began to canvass the areas where the victim lived and worked, Davies and Blunt, mostly Ben on the computer and Max on the phone, dug into Nick Tandy's past.

Born in Bristol, Tandy's family had moved a bit more south where the parents ran a popular inn, complete with many services for people on holidays anytime of the year. Nick had studied at the university in Bristol, though, where he'd excelled in pre-dental studies and discovered a love for the theater. The drama coach had been a professor in the English department, Cyril Godwin.

"He was marvelous in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example," Godwin said when asked about his acting abilities. "So much so that I suggested that he become a professional actor."

"Were you surprised to learn that he turned to directing local theater?"

"Not at all. He might have wanted to go beyond acting; many actors do. The theater's in his blood, maybe more so than dentistry."

"How was he as a student of dentistry?"

"I can't speak to that, but he was good enough in his pre-dental studies here to go on to dental school, so I imagine he excelled in that too. I always considered him a master of many trades. He was a dedicated hiker and twitcher as well. Brilliant fellow, I dare say."

*Bird watching and hiking go together*, Blunt thought. "I suppose you knew he was gay?"

"Didn't bother me at all. I vote Labour, Inspector, so I like to think people can do whatever they damn please as long as it doesn't trample on my rights."

"As far as you know, did he have any altercations with any professors or students?"

"I know of none. I suppose he disappointed a few female students, though. Quite a handsome fellow, Adonis-like. No, more like Michelangelo's David."

"You saw him naked?" Blunt realized immediately that what he was assuming might be a mistake.

Godwin laughed. "I saw him in a speedo. We both did laps in the university's pool for exercise, so our paths crossed there sometimes."

"I see." Blunt thought he wouldn't get anything more from the old professor. "If you later think of anything more that might help our investigation, please call me."

"I have your number. I hope you find the murderer, Inspector. Wait! There is one more thing. There was another thespian who stalked Nick."

"Male or female? And name?"

"Male. Nick had to get a restraining order, and I had to give the stalker the boot out of our theater group. He was an egotistical arse who thought he could act. Let me think...what was his name?" There was a long silence. "I'll have to look through my old records. I'll get back to you with the name."

Blunt didn't believe a spat between actors years earlier was a motive for murder now, but stalking might imply that the stalker was obsessively attracted to the Adonis-like Tandy. Obsession could evolve into some ugly years later, though. How egregious had the stalking been?

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Blunt was about to make another call when Davies knocked on his door jamb. The door was open, as it usually was. He liked to feel connected to his team.

"Anything from social media?" he said. Davies nodded. "Good or bad?"

"Bad. I'm skipping the good; there's plenty of that, but not much bad. A bloke with the handle BadLad999 was blasting Tandy on Facebook."

"What for?"

"Just about everything his perverted mind could invent, I suppose. Calling him everything under the sun, even saying that he seduces little children and then eats them."

"I've seen worse. Any threats?"

"Depends on your point of view. Is 'I'm coming for you when you least expect it, and I'll kill you' a threat, or just an arse mouthing off?"

"I'd say it's a threat. The 'least expect it' also matches how the murder occurred. Or maybe BadLad999 thinks he's a theater critic?"

Davies smiled. "Not that I could tell."

"Put an IT on it. Let's find out who BadLad999 is. I might be getting the name of a stalker too, from the victim's college days. Could be the same prat, I suppose."

"Yours seems too far back. The Facebook rants are more recent."

"Let's keep at it. At least we have something for our efforts. Last night's statement-gathering was a waste of time. As far as that went, Nick Tandy could be Christ."

"He wasn't gay," Davies said with a laugh.

"Point taken. I'm just saying he's squeaky clean."

"A few people didn't like him."

"Aye. At least one. Go find that techie. I'm going to make a call to my favorite pathologist to see if she learned anything that might be useful to us."

### Chapter Three

"Max, you know TOD and COD from last night," Kate said. "I'm still working on the body."

"Do a toxicology screen too, just in case. Maybe he was drugged before he was stabbed."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's a good way for a woman to have an easy task in stabbing him. She could be overpowered otherwise. Mr. Tandy was quite athletic, I'm told."

"Looks that way, unlike a certain copper who sits behind a desk too much and eats plod food."

"Who the hell does that? On another note, I'm sorry about last night. You were enjoying yourself, and I found myself liking the play too."

"Not your fault. And I had to nag a lot about going, so it's sad that my successful campaign was wasted."

"Um, you know me by now. Comedy was a good choice, though."

"Yes, it's a shame we couldn't see the entire play and missed out on dinner. I cancelled the reservation, by the way, knowing you'd forget. I ate leftovers warmed over in the microwave."

"I was a bit distracted, Luv. At least you had something hot. I just had a late-night sandwich. No dessert either, harking back to your earlier critique. You?"

"You were going to be my dessert, Max!"

"Ah! Now I'm doubly upset that our evening was ruined. Do you think they'll put on the play again later?"



"It might affect their whole schedule. And with the theater closed, plods guarding it, and police tape all around, the public will be wondering when that might occur, just like you are."

"And what about the theater group? Will it survive the loss of a director?"

"They'll recover, I'm sure. There has to be another director around somewhere."

"Maybe not as good as Nick Tandy. The replacement would have to be a special talent, and there's not likely one like him in the area with his qualities, either as an actor or a director. That's all from the victim's old professor."

"He was just a dentist, Max."

"Who was good at acting and directing—loved doing it, in fact, from what he told me. Have you seen his other productions?"

"No. This was the first time I could convince a certain copper to go with me. I read that he was marvelous in *Hamlet*, though, acting and directing that play."

"Considering what happened last night, that might have been a more appropriate play. And we do cultural things, Luv. I took you to the art museum."

"And you commented, loudly enough for others to hear, I might add, that it made sense that Picasso invented Cubism because his earlier work was so bad."

"So's his cubist stuff, to put a fine point on it. Most modern art looks like someone's little brat painted it in the middle of a tantrum."

"You're incorrigible. Enough. I have to get back to work."

"As do I. Takeaway tonight?"

"A curry would be nice, with lots of garlic naan."

"Your order is duly recorded. I'll also pick up some appropriate liquid refreshment as well."

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The team put in a full day with disappointing results. They'd eliminated a lot of people who, after interviews and canvassing, had no useful information to offer. No one acted suspiciously either.

Max was about to leave for the evening when his DCI made an appearance. Harold Potter looked like Professor Snape but often acted like that house elf because he usually made no sense. At that moment, he didn't look too happy. He slammed the local newspaper down on Blunt's desk. The DI barely glanced at it.

"So? Media's usual blather and twaddle, Harry. We've divulged nothing about our investigation."

"Ralph Brothers was there covering the play."

Blunt remembered the name. "He was trying to take pictures with his mobile. I told him to stuff it and get lost. Threatened to confiscate the damn device." He couldn't remember if that was true, but it would have been keeping in character. *The play's the thing*, Max thought.

"I know. Your threat was vividly described in the article. You can't do that, Max."

"The little twit probably overreacted or elaborated. I sent everyone away so Winslow and the SOCOs could do their thing. Get off my back, will you? I had to control a crime scene, and that involves putting the media on notice. Just give them your usual press conference, and they'll be happy."

"Is there anything to tell them yet?"

"Early days sir."

"Then no press conference. And from now on, no threats, or I'll demote you to uniformed constable."

"And I'll resign before you do, so go ahead and try it. I'm the only DI who wanted this posting. I can get one in Bristol PD in a flash."

"This insubordination will be added to your record!"

"Among all my successes?"

Harold Potter had turned purple by then. He spun on his heels, marched out, and slammed Max's door behind him.

Later, on his way out the door himself, Blunt passed Davies.

"Quite the barney, Guv. Are you okay?"

Blunt smiled. "Couldn't be better. I'm off to have a nice dinner with our pathologist. Harold Potter can go to hell. I as much told him to do it, but I'm now worried about the Devil. Potter could drive that job nuts too."

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As Blunt entered his car, he was smiling because he'd just remembered Davies's description of Potter before Blunt had even met the man: "He's really Voldemort who's taken over Harry's body." Blunt didn't think the DCI was evil, though; he was just incompetent, a typical example of Peter's Principle at work, and that wasn't St. Peter.

On his way to the Curry Castle, Blunt called in the order so it would be ready when he arrived, and then he picked up some red wine at Sam's Wine and Spirits. When he arrived at Kathy's flat, she was taking a bath.

"Dinner has arrived, Doctor Winslow. Shall I set the table?"

"Yes. I'll be right out."

She soon made her appearance, smiling and fluffing her hair. Her natural curls were drying into their usual chaotic and spring-like state.

"Most days I just take a shower, but today was bad."

"Another murder?"

"Road rage leading to a knife fight with no one the winner. Very messy. Transit coppers the only ones involved. Lucky you."

"Wouldn't have had time to be involved anyway."

"What curry did you pick up?"

"Lamb vindaloo. Should I serve it with bicarbonate?"

She laughed. "After my day, I can handle it." She eyed the wine bottle. "Australian Shiraz? Wasn't that expensive?"

"On sale, Lord knows why," Blunt lied. "Maybe they had a few old cases around before the tariffs hit? Didn't bother to ask, to be honest."

She punched him in the shoulder, the punch revealing her breasts. "I know you too well. You're lying. You shouldn't buy expensive wine on your salary."

"I didn't have time for lunch today, so no problem. I had extra cash."

"Don't do that again. You need lunch more than we need wine for dinner."

"Okay, okay." He smiled. "But what's done is done. Let's have a nice dinner to make up for last night, and I'll tell you about my latest battle with the new DCI."

"I don't want to talk shop. I want to talk about us. But you're right. We'll talk after we eat. You forgot the wine glasses, by the way."

## Chapter Four

In the morning, they went their separate ways: Kate towards the hospital where the morgue was; Max towards the nick. *En route*, he wondered how much he'd promised Kathy the night before after dinner was over. Enough action, but also a lot of talk; he remembered the first, but the second, not so well.

He could understand that she wanted more commitment. He'd looked for a steadier relationship himself because of his father's experience. He wasn't sure theirs could work long-term because their jobs would always steal time away from that relationship. It hadn't worked for his father, who'd spent his entire working life as a detective constable in Manchester, starting with a wife alone at home most of the time with his sister and him. That relationship had ended in a divorce, something not uncommon among coppers. Would Kathy alone at her place of work or at home waiting for him be any different? Would their work take up more and more of their time, causing them to drift apart?

Davies seemed to do just fine with the juggling act of family and work, certainly a lot better than Blunt's father had. Ben had a solid family life; his wife was a nurse, so there were also two careers involved; and they had two kids, one now in primary, the other in secondary. Maybe his success was because his father was a successful businessperson, so there was no bad role model to mess up Ben's mind? Or was Ben going to suffer the same fate as Blunt's father eventually?

He became a lot less serious and happier when he walked into CID and the DCI wasn't there. Max thought he might get some real work done that day, something Potter rarely did.

Ben was already at his computer.

"Any joy amidst the databases?" Max said to him, plopping down in a chair beside his sergeant.

"That old professor called and left a message. I also traced that one restraining order Tandy obtained. The stalker's name was Daniel Thompson. He never graduated, and he has form."

"For stalking?"

"For selling drugs. Nothing more than marijuana and other stuff that requires a prescription some people don't want to bother with."

"Like painkillers?" Davies nodded. "Those can be addictive too. That's why they're controlled."

"Of course. He was importing them illegally from Albania, pretending to be a doctor with a private practice. He was lucky. Received a year and got off early for good behavior. Had to do some community service, though."

"Interesting. So, they nicked him, and he blamed Nick?"

Ben smiled. "No evidence that he had anything to do with Tandy after college. Think about it: Why would he wait so long to act?"

"Maybe it was like a tea kettle building up steam. And maybe we should pay him a little visit. Where does he live?"

"South Bristol conurbation, inland from the ports."

"Up for a ride?"

"Why not? Are you afraid Voldemort will return?"

"Forget the DCI. We have jobs to do."

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The trip took longer than Blunt had expected. *Traffic gets worse every year*, he thought. Of course, by taking the motorway, they doubled the distance they had to crawl along as if they were in a rural area following a hay wagon. Everyone else heading into London was probably thinking the same.

Daniel Thompson's place was in a neighborhood filled with working people's identical houses only distinguishable by the ubiquitous front gardens where some individual touches could be seen. He answered the door.

"Heard about Nick. Knew plods would come around. You'd better come in."

The house was a tip. When Thompson offered tea or coffee, both Ben and Max declined, Max supposing Ben's reason was the same as his: If the sitting room was any indication, the kitchen would be a pigpen.

Max took a chair that didn't look like it had protruding springs; Ben sat on a stool that might have been stolen from a pub.

"We understand there was a time when you were obsessed with Nick Tandy," Max began. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Just before they nicked me for the drugs. Saw him crossing the street when the patrol car pulled up."

"He was there?"

"His dental office is a few blocks away, and parking is scarce there, so he left his car near my flat. I lived above a chemist's shop. Live, actually. I bought the flat."

"How convenient." Thompson didn't smile. "So, you weren't stalking him?"

"I never did, although he thought I was, hence the restraining order. I'll admit I was attracted to him, but we went our own way after university."

"Can you tell me where you were yesterday evening?"

"Pub downtown. The publican can vouch for me."

"And what do you do now, Mr. Thompson, after leaving the drugs business?"

Thompson smiled. "I retrained. Part of my community service was being an orderly in the hospital. Motivated me, that did. I've become a nurse."

"And they hired you with the nick time for drugs dealing on your record?"

"I was lucky. They needed help. Covid led to a lot of resignations. I'm not allowed anywhere near drugs, of course. They're all under lock and key anyway."

"I see. But they did know about your previous, shall we say, profession?"

"Of course. They check applications thoroughly, so I put it right on the application. Getting time off for good behavior helped, of course."

"Okay. Sorry to bother you, Daniel. Looks like you turned your life around. Any ideas about who might have had it in for your old friend."

Thompson thought a moment. "Um, you didn't hear it from me, but Tess Nolan resented the partnership between her husband Peter and Nick."

"If Nick was gay, why would she be resentful?"

"Again, you didn't hear it from me, but I know for a fact that Peter is bisexual. At least he was in college."

"Um, she seemed to be rather distraught last night when Nick was killed."

Thompson looked at Ben and winked. "Are you getting all this, sergeant?" Ben nodded. "You haven't done your homework, Inspector. Tess was an aspiring actress in college. She was better at it than Nick. Just ask old Cyril."

## Chapter Five

"This is getting to be a complex case," Max said to Ben as he slid into the passenger's seat of the car. "Let's hear what you think, lad."

"It's possible that Thompson is lying about everything. We have to first check his alibi. We then should call the professor and confirm that Tess was an actor. Assuming everything Thompson said was true, though, we'll then have to talk to Tess again. She might have done more than discover Nick's body."

"I was thinking Thompson might be lying. He's hiding something, that's for sure. Is it possible that he and Peter Nolan are still an item? If so, why would Tess target Nick?"

"Because she thought Nick and Peter were an item? As far as she'd know, Daniel Thompson was out of Nick's life."

"Um, a definite possibility. Which motive is stronger? A possible obsession Thompson still had for Nick? Or a woman's jealousy?"

"Guv, Thompson might also be jealous and is trying to frame Peter."

"You have a twisted mind, Ben Davies."

"And you're old-fashioned, Max. Homosexuals are just people, you know, and they can have all the hang-ups any human being can have—jealousy, obsession, desire for revenge, and maintaining stable relationships as well."

"That's very open-minded of you, lad."

"I've learned a lot because my wife's sister is a lesbian."

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Thompson's alibi checked out. The publican couldn't be mistaken. There'd only been three customers in the pub the night Nick Tandy was killed, and Thompson had been one of them.

Cyril Godwin also confirmed that Tess Nolan was active in the thespian group at college. She'd often been paired in leading roles with Nick. Had she considered her props manager job a demotion?

They went to see Tess.

If she'd been acting the night before, she was still in character. She still seemed distraught. "Peter almost couldn't go to work today," she said. "There'll be patients upset as well. Everyone loved Nick."

"Including Peter?"

"They were best friends, so yes." She eyed Max. "Just what are you implying?"

"Were Nick and Peter in a relationship? Now or anytime before?"

"What? Of course not! Not my Peter! They were just good friends."

"Were Peter and Daniel Thompson good friends?"

"Daniel was just creepy. He couldn't act worth shite. He left college early."

"And lived near Nick and Peter's practice. Did you know that, Tess?"

"So, what if I did? I was worried that Daniel was still obsessed with Nick. So was Nick." She blanched. "Are you suggesting that Daniel killed Nick?" She thought a moment. "Yes, I could believe that. I know Daniel works in the hospital now. I figured that was probably to steal drugs. But murder? On second thought, no, not Daniel. He's creepy but not a murderer. And the best thing that ever happened to Daniel was when old Cyril got him expelled."

"The drama professor?"

"Cyril's an old actor as much as a professor. Good man, Cyril. Probably up in years now, the old homo."

"Excuse me?"

"Cyril's gay. We all knew it. We didn't care. Different times, now, Inspector. He brought out the best in all of us. He and Nick would spend a lot of evenings together to get the right spin on the lines Nick had in a play."

Max glanced at Ben. "Thank you, Mrs. Nolan. We'll be going now."

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"We need to delve more into Professor Godwin's past," Max told Ben in the car. "Perhaps he was the one who thought Nick and Peter were in a relationship."

"After getting rid of Daniel by expelling him. Maybe the old fool had a thing for Nick?"

"Um, maybe more than 'a thing' when Nick was in college. More complications, lad. I was almost convinced it was Tess. Do you suppose that was what Daniel was hiding? He and the professor might have had a fling, but Nick wouldn't?"

"Or they wanted a triad? We need to talk to the professor."

"I'll call him."

The professor agreed to see them at his home, so they were off on another road trip. When they arrived, the front door was ajar.

"This is a bit weird," Ben said.

Max called out. No response, so they entered. They found Cyril Godwin in the upstairs bedroom, an empty bottle of sleeping pills tossed onto the floor.

"Call Kathy and the SOCOs," Max told Ben. "We've either got a suicide or another murder. We need to know if it's the latter."

Max and Ben waited on the phone. The sergeant was on his mobile with his wife, telling her he was going to be late. Max was afraid he would be too, and he'd have to face Kathy as she exited the professor's house.

"SOCOs are still rummaging around, Max," she said at that time. "I'm betting they won't find anything."

"Did he commit suicide?"

"Doubtful. I'll confirm when I get him into the morgue, but I believe he was smothered. There are some epithelials under his nails as if he were fighting someone off."

"The sleeping pills?"

"Shoved down his throat postmortem. Most were still there. My guess that was someone trying to make it look like suicide. The pills are from the hospital's pharmacy, by the way."

"Old fellow probably had insomnia," Ben said. "Wrinklies often can't sleep." She glared at him. "Just sayin'. My old man has that problem."

"I presume his pills were prescribed?" Ben nodded. "These weren't."

Max thought a moment. "We need to have another chinwag with Mr. Thompson!"

Kathy looked around. "I need a ride. I came in the meat wagon."  
"We're going your way," Max said.

## Chapter Six

At the hospital, Kathy left Max and Ben to return to her morgue to start her report. She'd be waiting for the body to arrive and would be busy with other things until it did. Max and Ben headed for the pharmacy with the bottle of pills.

The NHS chemist on duty could read the label through the plastic bag. "Definitely one of ours. Like our other critical drugs, this one's under lock and key. Let me go check both our supply and the sign-out sheets."

He returned in ten minutes. "Three bottles missing that weren't signed out. Some nurse is going to be in a lot of trouble."

Max nodded. "We have a good idea which one. Can you do us another favor? This isn't an addictive drug, so does Daniel Thompson have access to it?"

"Just a minute." The chemist returned. "He does. So, he's the one in trouble maybe?"

"Let us handle it," Ben said.

They headed upstairs. Unfortunately, Thompson spotted them coming out of the lift. He dropped a bedpan and headed for the stairs.

"After him, lad!"

Ben could take the stairs two at a time, as Thompson was probably doing as well. Max struggled to keep up.

He arrived in the morgue well behind Ben but heard Thompson say, "Stay clear, plod, or I'll slit Dr. Winslow's throat."

Ben was standing a few feet in front of Winslow's desk, Kathy and Thompson behind it. He faced her, holding her behind the neck with his left hand and holding a scalpel against her throat with his right; there was already a trickle of blood. Max saw all of that peering over his sergeant's shoulder. He also saw Kathy's twitching right foot as she stared at the scalpel.

"You've been living with jealousy a long time, Mr. Thompson, haven't you? Ever since Professor Godwin chose Nick over you, both as an actor and a lover. You must have recently planned to get even with both of them. Am I correct?"

"I wanted to frame Peter as well," Thompson said with a sneer. "He also rejected me."

"Did you ever see the movie *Basic Instinct*?" Max said.

"What's that sordid tale got to do with anything?"

"You've topped it, lad."

That's when Max hit the lights and then sprayed both Kate and Thompson with the fire extinguisher.

Ben turned the lights back on. Thompson was rolling on the ground, one hand now wiping spray from his eyes, the other clutching his privates. The scalpel rested far away in the office's corner.

"I was hoping you'd see my twitching leg," Kathy said.

"I also remembered your observation a while ago about how vulnerable a man's goolies are. You still took a big chance."

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"We make a good crime-fighting duo," Kathy said, toasting Max with her white wine. "A regular Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot."

"Katherine Winslow, I'll remind you that we're still a bit younger than those two. Let's not make what happened a habit, Luv. If you'd leaned forward...."

"I'm not stupid. It was natural to lean back anyway to get my knee on target. And by the time you arrived, he had the scalpel's sharp edge turned away from me. What took you so long? Ben was there forever, trying to figure out what to do."

"Lack of experience and not knowing you well enough froze the poor lad. Did you get all the spume off?"

She was sitting across the table from him, dressed in only a bathrobe again. "Killing the lights would have been enough, Max. He didn't know his way around the morgue that well. He came down once just to look around. Or not." She smiled. "The day Nick Tandy's body was there, as a matter of fact, so maybe to gloat. I should have known something was up. You've got to confide in me more."

He smiled. "One's never too old to learn, my sweet." He now raised his pint in a toast. "Want to swear off plays for a while?"

"Heavens no! I have a ticket for a Kingsbridge play. It's for Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Which will be good advice that you must follow under the covers tonight."



## **The Conference**

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#### **Preface**

After reading a lot of British-style mysteries and experimenting a bit with writing some, I decided to create a combination story of hard-boiled American investigation (in this case, from a journalist and sheriff) with sophisticated British sleuthing (from a physicist, of all people). This is the result.

#### **Chapter One**

Michael pulled his vehicle to the side of the road behind another whose owner was struggling mightily to change a tire.

"Let me help you, lass," he said as he approached her. "You might be oxidized and need some male muscles."

That startled her and then made her angry as she looked up to see him looming over her. He could see the color rise up her perspiring neck.

"These nuts might be rusty like yours, but don't go playing the body-builder role. And stop with that fake British accent." He stepped back a bit, wondering what he'd said to make her angry, but she sighed and smiled. "Okay, I could use some help. But I think changing the damn tire won't do me much good. The axle might be bent out of shape. I was speeding a bit because I'm late for a conference, and I hit a pothole."

"As am I." He knelt beside her, resting his hands on his knees. "Bound for a conference, that is, but not speeding. Your diagnosis unfortunately seems to be correct. Rim's twisted and probably your axle as well. A bad pothole." He looked back along the road. "This old country road is full of them. I feel as at home as if I were in England." He stood and smiled at her. "I'd lock your vehicle up and leave it. Out here in the middle of nowhere, it's safe, although I doubt anyone would steal it in this condition. Load your stuff into my hire-car. We can call a tow lorry when we arrive. I'm sure the conference's organizers can recommend someone. Assuming it's the same conference. 'New Frontiers in Theoretical Physics'?"

She nodded, her brown hair falling into her eyes. "It's my car, not a—what did you call it?—a hire-car. I'm assuming that means rental car?" She glanced towards the much newer model he'd been driving and then back at her vehicle. "I'm rather fond of mine. My first car, in fact."

"We shall treat it well then and find an appropriate car physician. Come on. I'll even let you do me a favor and drive that petrol guzzler they gave me in the airport. You people drive on the wrong side of the car...and the road."

"I guess you are British." She held out a hand after brushing dried mud from it. "Annie Gillis, science reporter. Are you with a 'zine too?"

"Yes, I do make the news, in a manner of speaking. Science news, to put a fine point on it. My name's Michael Jackson."

"You're kidding, right?"

He shrugged and flashed a sheepish smile. "Just don't expect a 'moon walk.'"

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"Where did you drive from, Annie?" Michael said once they'd continued on their way. He was admiring how the sunlight scattered from her hair that was cut short into a Beatle-like mop.

"Springfield, Virginia. Just outside DC where I work."

"I'm not completely familiar with your East Coast geography, but isn't that quite a drive from there to here?"

"We'll end up close to Camp David, but yes, Springfield is still considered in the DC area, I suppose. I was a bit nearer than you were in London."

"I flew in to BWI, so maybe my drive was less, although probably more hectic. I suppose DC traffic is horrible however you approach it. And I thought London was bad."

"The DC area has become worse over the last few years. Fortunately, there's a lot of turnover on apartment rentals when old administrations leave and new ones come in. Sometimes it seems like the whole civil service is on the move."

"Deer!"

Annie swerved to miss the jaywalking doe. "I'll have to slow down, I'm afraid, even if it makes us late."

"The organizers called the conference site rustic. I believe them now. I hope they don't serve venison roadkill as an entree."

"Ugh! You're terrible!" She punched him in the shoulder. "I guess the Brits' science tabloids think this event is important enough to send you all the way over here."

"Indeed," he said with a sly smile. "Do you have a list of scientists who will attend? I never got one."

"An incomplete one. 'Other attendees will be announced later' was the message at the list's bottom. We'll get a complete one when we arrive, I hope. I also hope we're not competing with other science reporters."

He looked at his watch. "Take it easy and go slower. We'll still make cocktails. That's what's important today as far as I'm concerned. I'm looking forward to trying some moonshine. Maybe I can do a moon walk then."

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There was no one in the lobby to handle their check-in when they arrived.

"Some old wrinklie probably needed a loo break, poor old thing," Michael said. "We'll get sorted later. Let's find some refreshments."

A sign at the far end of the lobby pointed them to a cafeteria. They found others there sipping on a variety of beverages, including alcoholic ones. Some tables had been shifted up against one wall and filled with snacks and tea and coffee accompaniments, coffee and hot water urns, and bottles of wine and beer.

"No moonshine, but this Napa wine might do the trick. Shall I pour you a glass, Annie?"

She was turning some bottles in an ice bucket. "I'll have an IPA. I suppose we of the press should sit together so we can study all the famous old scientists. I doubt they're brilliant conversationalists anyway, and I like to choose my targets carefully."

"That's a good idea. I recognize a few attendees, and those would only want to blather about esoteric twaddle. I prefer the company of a pretty lass, to be honest."

She blushed slightly. "Don't make any presumptions, Romeo. I'm not beguiled by your charms. I even doubt they can be called that."

They found a table at the other end of the cafeteria. She studied the crowd of scientists; he studied her.

"Have I insulted you in some way?" he said.

She turned to him. "No, but you're arrogant and insufferable at times. Or you seem to be that way. Are you here to target a particular scientist for an interview?"

"There's one I fancy. A brilliant young fellow who's shy and unassuming. I suppose they're all fair game, though, and will provide color for your article. The public needs to recognize the importance of science again."

"That's why I work on this job, to keep the public informed about what's going on in the world of science."

"Do you have a specialization yourself?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. I have a BS in archaeology and anthropology."

"Yes, that was my meaning. Have you been on digs then?"

"A long one for my thesis. Smaller ones too. It's hard work."

"I imagine, but someone has to do it. Science is like that. Most people don't realize how much work it takes to push the frontier forward."

"That's a good line. I can tell you are a writer."

"Thank you."

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Their discussion faltered from that point, mostly because Annie reacted badly to some of Michael's questions. He was just interested in her—considered her a bit exotic compared to UK lasses. He also wanted to appear to be just an average bloke, no one special, just another reporter who had something in common with her.

They heard noises from along the corridor to the cafeteria that implied sign-in had resumed, so they journeyed back to get their keys.

"Miss Gillis, you're 2-H; Mr. Jackson, you're 2-L. I hope you don't need help with your baggage. We're a bit short on help right now. Some of our staff only work mornings."

"You have a lovely accent, ma'am," Michael said to the older woman. "Are you perhaps from the Deep South?"

"Arkansas. Not that far south, but my parents were from Alabama."

"That explains it. One often speaks like his or her parents."

"What are you, some kind of Henry Higgins?" Annie said as they headed for Michael's hire-car to fetch their bags. "We don't mock regional accents here in the US."

"I wasn't mocking. I was fascinated. Why take the fun out of life when you find it? She has a beautiful accent. You should hear Cumbrian or Welsh. Or a Scottish brogue. Our educational system tries to make us all speak like the King, and what he speaks can't really be called English. What would *Pygmalion* be without our Cockney Eliza Doolittle, to borrow your reference?"

"We don't consider regional accents because we all try to get along."

"And what will you have? Everyone talking and acting like everyone else, that's what. How boring!"

Annie grabbed her suitcase and valise and went on ahead, but said over her shoulder, "Have a jolly good day, Mr. Michael Jackson!"

Michael watched her take off and shrugged, again not understanding why she was annoyed.

## Chapter Two

Annie was already interviewing someone when Michael came down for cocktails. The tall and lean man waved; she ignored him and returned to her interviewee. They had come to a point where she had to ask about the white-haired physicist's recent work and why he was there at the conference. Jonathon Fox organized his thoughts for a moment and then began what amounted to a lecture. *Too much information!*

"So...you see, my contributions are negligible. I'm just jumping on the bandwagon, and a bit late, I might add. We often do. Some smart young fellow does seminal work by blazing a new trail into the wilderness; others follow him to see where it goes. In other words, scientific research has its fads too."

"I understand. Like the Denisovan fad in archaeology and paleoanthropology."

"I suppose. I'm not familiar with that. A large part of the papers that will be presented at this conference are about this esoteric research I've described. A fad. I prefer conferences like this one, though, ones that focus on only a few topics, three in this case. APS events all too often cover far too many."

Annie eyed her notes. "American Physical Society?" He nodded. "And who might this trailblazer be in your particular field? If she or he is here, perhaps I should interview that person as well?"

"By all means. I'm an amateur compared to him. Brilliant fellow, the one that waved at you when he came in. I thought you knew him."

Annie caught her pen before it hit the floor. She straightened in her chair and then leaned forward. "Michael Jackson?"

"Yes. The fellow from Cambridge."

"He's half your age!"

"In theoretical physics, especially the esoteric stuff, advances are often made by young women and men. Richard Feynman was twenty-three, for example, when he created quantum electrodynamics, at least his version, which amounted to a new trail he blazed into the wilderness."

Annie was blushing. "He never told me, the cad!"

"I presume you mean Professor Jackson. Why would he? I understand he's quite a modest fellow."

"What he was doing was lying by omission. He was practically hitting on me too, Professor Fox."

"Um, I see. Perhaps he didn't want your awe to stand between you two. I wouldn't get upset. It all probably means that he likes you. Of course, I don't know him that well. Nothing about his romantic life, to be precise."

"Romantic? Maybe on his part. I'll kill the SOB!"

"That would hamper your interview with him, I'd wager."

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After Annie wrapped up her interview with Fox, she passed by Michael's table where he was chatting with three other attendees older than he was, one of them a woman.

"Annie, please join us," he said, scooting over and pulling in a chair next to him from the neighboring table.

"I'm told I must interview you, the celebrated genius attending this conference. Let me know when you're available." She winked at the woman. "He's all yours." She stomped off.

"What was that all about?" said Dora Fox, also a physicist. "She looks like she wants to cut out your liver and make pat  out of it."

Michael was watching Annie weave through the chairs and sofas and other tables on her way out of the lounge. "Perhaps she's missing her motorcar. She's rather attached to it. I should arrange for it to be towed. She broke down on the way here, and I gave her a ride."

"Ah, I see. She's having a bad day. Nothing personal then."

"I hope you're right. I rather fancy her, but our relationship hasn't started off very well."

"Here's my husband," said Dora. She made introductions.

"That Gillis woman is as bit excitable," Jonathon said, taking the chair Michael had intended for Annie. "Runs a fair interview, though."

"What was your chinwag about?" Michael said. He knew Jonathon Fox only from his publications.

"At the end, about you. I concluded she had no idea who you were."

Michael thought a moment. "I guess I didn't tell her. I just assumed she knew at first, and I just wanted to appear to be a normal bloke anyway."

"I suspected that. She might have thought that everyone here is Jonathon and my age," Dora said.

"Yes, most people are a few years older than I am," Michael said, surveying the lounge. "So what?"

"Reporters can have preconceived notions just like everyone else," Jonathon said. "Does anyone play bridge? I'm trying to set up some foursomes for after the opening ceremony."

"Not me. My idea of a good game is darts in a pub."

Dora laughed. "No darts or pubs here, Michael."

He nodded to indicate the large window and the rear gardens and the lake beyond. "Good place to have a walk then. Are there bears?"

They all laughed now. "I'd assume the mosquitoes down by that lake are more dangerous, especially at sunset."

"I'd better shove off then. When are the opening ceremonies?"

"Seven to eight, then a late dinner. Probably light fare. They'll be assuming we'll fill up enough now on hors-d'oeuvre."

"Here's me on my way then," he said, standing. "I wish you blokes luck finding your foursomes."

"Strange fellow," said Jonathon as they all watched Michael leave.

"We're all strange," Dora said. "It's an occupational hazard. And he's also oblivious. I'm going to try to get those two together."

"That didn't work well, Dora, with your younger sister. Don't ruin the poor fellow's stay with your matchmaking efforts."

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It was almost too hot to walk, but Michael began his hike around the lake anyway, only to spot Annie sitting on a bench and staring at the water. *Should I turn back and hope she returns to the conference buildings before I come around the other way?* He shrugged, bit on a virtual bullet, and kept walking in her direction.

"I know you're there," she said, still staring at the lake.

"Will you allow me to join you so I can apologize?"

"I guess. Lies of omission are still lies, you know."

He sat beside her, reached down for a flat piece of gravel, and skipped it across the lake. "An objective person might question that, especially when it wasn't intentional on my part, at least not completely. Women can be stand-offish when they hear about my profession, classifying me as some kind of freak. I don't play the bongos like Feynman, but I do other things that aren't particularly associated with physics, you know."

"Like what?"

"I have a keyboard, full set of keys and portable, because I move around a lot. My parents saved and denied themselves things to give me piano lessons." He held out his hands and spread his fingers. "Mum said I have Rachmaninoff hands. Unfortunately, good hands don't a classical pianist make. But I do enjoy playing. I also enjoy a nice dinner out with an enchanting woman, even if she's a little touchy." He winked at her. He indicated the landscape. "Or just sitting on a bench with her, enjoying the view."

She blushed a bit. "Maybe we should both apologize. I could have scooped everyone else by interviewing you first...if only I'd known."

"There are no other reporters here. You can still do that. I suspect there will be time tomorrow, especially after our organizer and only attending Nobel prize winner struts his stuff."

"Jacob McAdams? Isn't he also one of yours?"

"Being one of ours is why I know he'll be strutting, even if he were the only black hole expert here, which isn't the case. He makes no attempt to control his ego."

"I take it you don't like him."

"Maybe it's unjustified, but my profession has quite a few egoists. Sometimes I feel they take it out on society. Our educational system in the sciences seems to produce to many of them."

"And you're not an egoist?"

"Perhaps Americans tend to think all Englishmen are because we so often dwell on pomp and circumstance. From discussions I've had with Indian mathematicians and physicists, we have a worse caste system than they do. It's just not so obvious."

"Can I quote you?"

"No. When you start your interview, everything from thereon is fair game. I'm just trying to present myself as a fellow human being, a normal, average fellow and not one who lies by omission." He smiled.

She held up a hand. "Peace, then. Where did you learn to skip rocks?"

"The Lake District. Cumbria. Another lad taught me once how to do it when I was on holiday there."

She bent down, found the rock she wanted, and made a left-handed toss. She got three more skips than he had. He laughed. "My dad taught me."

They sat in amiable silence until just before seven, not late enough for a sunset across the lake but early enough to beat the bugs' arrival.

### Chapter Three

"I want to welcome all of you to 'New Frontiers in Theoretical Physics,' the first annual UK-US mathematical physics conference."

"How can it be annual if it's only the first?" Michael whispered to Annie who sat beside him.

She pinched his knee and put an index finger to her lips.

"Now that most of you are sorted—those who aren't get the leftovers in lodging—" That caused a few chuckles. "—we can get down to business. First slide, please." Jacob McAdams indicated the first item on the schedule with his laser pointer. "'Welcoming.' That's my shtick. I'd like to include some organizational points and general history. 'Lectures.' That's mostly the responsibility of you folks. There will be three concurrently running sessions on particle physics theories, quantum gravity, and applied topology; and all attendees can pick and choose which lectures they'd like to hear...if they're not lecturing themselves, of course."

How McAdams could fill most of an hour after that mystified Michael. Of course, much of the general history was only a none too subtle reminder to the audience about how appreciative they should feel because he'd had the idea for the conference and how to go about funding it. In other words, all it amounted to was an enormous pat on the back of self-congratulation and an admission that the Nobel prize had brought him many contacts among the UK and US plutocrats who really ran the countries.

Michael nearly dozed off twice. Annie stopped taking notes long enough to pinch him awake both times. When McAdams finished and the large room began emptying, he stifled two wide yawns.

"Can you imagine going to that egoist's lectures?" he said to Annie in a voice that was no longer a whisper.

She looked around but then said, "But he's brilliant, isn't he?"

"I'm not qualified to judge his research. And even a physics Nobel can be political. Royal this and that, ho-hum."

"You're jealous!"

"Not me. I don't have time to spend on jealousy. Let's see if we can find Dora and Jonathon Fox. They're more my idea of good company. You didn't let me introduce you to them before."

"I thought you were at that table for her."

"She wears her years with grace, I'll agree. She's also ten years younger than Jonathon. She used to be one of his tutoring aides, I believe. Now they do research together, one theoretical and the other more experimental, among other things." He winked. "She's pleasant, but not my type. I'm not quite sure what my type is yet, but I know she's not."

She smiled. "Okay, we'll avoid McAdams for now, but I do have to interview him. He's scientific director of the conference, after all."

"I can't imagine interviewing him being a lot of fun. You'll hear a lot of the first-person pronoun, I'm sure."

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They shared a dinner table with the Foxes and two other couples. The conversations were surprisingly general, considering the majority sitting around the table were scientists, and talk was mostly about scandals among American and British politicians and British royalty. Statehood for DC and independence for Scotland were also discussed. More cocktails and wine loosened lips.

Annie had a great time. Every so often she would glance at the dais where McAdams and several VIPs associated with running the conference center sat. After Michael's comments, she wasn't looking forward to interviewing him. He was vain about his appearance and had an imperial scowl that reminded her of someone, a sneering countenance that looked down on anyone whom he considered to be lesser mortals.

After dessert, the banquet room's lights went off. The moonless night was only pushed aside by the small lamps that surrounded the lake in the distance.

It was movie time. Someone, at McAdams direction, had put together a video overview of the progress made in the three areas the conference would focus on. Annie thought it was well done and something like a PBS Nova segment, although McAdams's commentary was nasal and annoying.

Somewhere before the quantum gravity section ended, there was a loud thud. She saw Michael jerk out of his stupor—both dinner and dessert had been heavy, not light fare at all—but she couldn't determine the sound's direction. She thought it might originate with the caterers in the kitchen in back of the stage.

When the lights came on after the video ended, everyone gasped. McAdams's face rested on the table in his dessert plate.

Michael jumped up. "Stay calm, everyone. This is now a crime scene. Please leave the auditorium in an orderly fashion. Once outside, someone should call the authorities."

She thought that was a bit over the top—who was he to assume command?—but audience members were so shocked that they obeyed, filing into the foyer outside the dining hall.

Michael rushed to the dais. "Don't touch anything! Especially his glass." He whipped out a rubber glove and put it on. She watched fascinated as he tried to find a pulse in the man's wrist and neck. "Either he's had a seizure, or he's dead." He picked up the glass with the gloved hand and sniffed. "I'd wager he's been poisoned with cyanide. Please, those here at the main table, join the others outside the hall. I must preserve the crime scene."

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Annie and Michael took chairs at one of the front tables to wait for authorities.

"How did you know to do all those things?" she said, taking a breather from her furious notetaking. *What a story!*

"Agatha Christie and beyond," he said. Seeing she was still perplexed, he added: "I love British-style mysteries. Christie started that subgenre of crime stories. I started reading them under covers as a child, with a flashlight. There are certain procedures one must follow, Annie, or the crime can only be solved with great difficulty."

"How do you know that it's cyanide poisoning?"

"Almond odor, my dear. It's as obvious as if the killer stabbed him in the back with a dagger. Ah, here's someone in authority."

A corpulent man in a tan suit with a star pinned on his chest pointed his finger at them. "Out! Get out with the others. This is a crime scene."



Michael stood, read the tag pinned to the man's shirt, and held out a hand. "Sheriff Olson, pleased to meet you. That's what I told them. We have preserved the crime scene for you. You'll find that COD is poisoning from cyanide. It will be a challenge to find the culprit."

"Will it now? And who the fuck are you?"

Michael tapped the conference sticker on his chest. "Michael Jackson, from Cambridge."

"A damn Yankee. You sound like a Brit."

"Cambridge, England, sir, not Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although I've been there a few times."

"I don't care if you're from Cambridge, Antarctica. Get out. And take this woman with you. We'll get to you later." He thought a minute. "Since you're such a busybody organizer, go out there and make sure no one leaves."

Michael clicked his heels together and gave a salute. "Yes, sir. I'll help until your deputies and the pathologist and SOCOs arrive. Good luck, sheriff."

Annie followed Michael out. She wondered who the SOCOs might be, but she thought pathologist might be the British version of an ME.

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Annie expected to find a noisy, excited crowd. Instead, they found a subdued one. The Foxes approached them.

"Should we get the caterers to hand out drinks?" Dora said.

"Yes, I suppose refreshments are in order," said Michael, "even though we just had dinner."

"I'll take care of that," said Annie.

"Listen up, everyone," Michael called out. "The sheriff asked me to tell you that no one should leave here. I suppose he wants to take statements. The conference staff will be offering refreshments. You all know where the loos are."

"Some have already left," said one white-haired scientist, "and others even left after dinner finished."

"Hopefully they're still on the grounds. Could I ask for some volunteers to collect names in order to make a tally. I'm sure the sheriff will find such a list useful."

There were several volunteers, including the white-haired scientist.

Michael then found a seat. For some reason, he was exhausted. *Had he taken too big a whiff from that glass?* He wasn't a chemist. He had no idea if cyanide fumes were poisonous as well. He suspected they might be.

He was one of the last to be offered refreshments. He chose an IPA and dozed off while waiting for it.

Someone shook him awake. Annie took the empty chair beside him.

"The refreshments were too much of a success. Some people got enough liquid courage to wonder why you're in charge."

"I'm not in charge. But someone had to be. I suppose there are all sorts of theories about what happened as well. That's a crowd for you."

"Yes, that too, including the one that you killed him and your taking over is a coverup. Are you okay, by the way?"

"A bit tired for some reason." He thought a moment. "Let's take a look at the AC system."

The waiter was left standing with their drinks after he told them where the center's equipment room could be found.

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Another rubber glove was required, this time to switch off an old gasoline generator. Its exhaust pipe emptied into the duct system.

"Someone wanted to kill all of us!" Annie said.

"No, just enough carbon monoxide gas to make us groggy so that someone could switch Jacob's glasses."

"But McAdams was talking."

"That was his voice on the video's soundtrack, not him in person. The recording was excellent, but I could tell that's what it was. We just heard his live welcoming speech."

"Should we tell the sheriff about this?"

"You tell him. I don't think he likes me. I'll wait for his SOCOs and protect this second crime scene."

"What the hell are SOCOs?"

"Scene-of-Crime Officers. You know, forensics specialists, like in your CSI." He waved her off. "I'll be sitting on this ledge. Go get someone in authority."

A sheriff's deputy soon returned with Annie. Michael jerked a thumb at the generator. "You'll want to dust that for prints and look for DNA samples. I doubt that you'll find anything, though."

The deputy kneeled to examine how the generator was set up. "Damn thing was rigged to send carbon monoxide into the ductwork."

"My conclusions exactly. It's possible some of the participants missed the opening festivities because they're unconscious in their rooms."

"We'll check on that. Who the hell are you, by the way?"

"One of the participants. Annie Gillis here is covering our conference for the press."

"She already introduced herself. Go join the rest of the eggheads, you two. And don't get in our way."

Annie and Michael finally got their refreshments and were chatting with several participants when three persons who'd been missing were carried out on stretchers.

"They'll recover," Michael said to the small group around them. "Not enough CO and not enough exposure time. Jacob's killer just wanted all of us to be a bit groggy."

"It must be one of the servers, don't you think?" said Jonathon Fox.

"Why, professor, anyone who didn't like that egotistical bloke should be a suspect. He might have been a brilliant physicist, but he was an abrasive fellow."

Fox nodded and gulped down the rest of his whiskey.

## Chapter Four

After most of the sheriff's party had left, taking the body with them, Sheriff Olson and a Deputy Hardy began interviewing everyone. They left Annie, Michael, and the conference staff for last. Of the last ones, Annie went first.

"Just give it to him straight," Michael told her. "Our stories will match."

"It's not a story. I'll just tell him the truth."

"Precisely."

When she came out, she looked furious.

"It's obvious that Sheriff Santa Claus hates the press. I was ordered not to file any stories."

"But if you work for a 'zine, it will take forever to be published. A day or two anyways."

"This story's too big to wait. I could have done a freelance job, maybe even sending it to the NY Times and the Washington Post. Now I'm muzzled."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm pissed. I'm going to bed."

"A bit of a hothead, ain't she?" said the old waiter who had given Michael his IPA.

"A fiery lass, to be sure. At least her anger's no longer directed at me." Michael saw Deputy Hardy calling him in.

They had borrowed the conference site's administrative offices' conference room to run their interrogations. The sheriff didn't stand when Michael entered the room. Hardy took a chair next to Olson; Michael one opposite them.

"Michael Jackson from Cambridge, England," checking his name on the list Michael had called for. The sheriff waved the papers. "Thanks for your help. The three taken to the hospital count for three of the five missing names here. The other two must be walking around somewhere. I have another deputy looking for them. But back to you. I think you're covering up your animosity towards McAdams by being so helpful."

"I thought you might. He was a hard man to like, and I'm not the only scientist who disliked him, whether British or some other nationality."

"But he was British?"

"Yes, but probably of Irish or Scottish descent. If you're looking for his killer among the conference participants, I'd focus first on those in his same specialty, though, irrespective of nationality."

"And how would I do that?" He waved the list. "Some volunteered that information even if we didn't ask for it, but we don't have it for many others."

"The conference staff will probably have that information. Or you'll find it in McAdams's notes. He organized this event."

"So, I'm told." He eyed Michael. "I'm a stubborn man, so back to my theory. Why did you take over if it wasn't to cover up your crime?"

"Have you ever read any of Christie's works? Or P. D. James's?"

"Do you mean novels?" Michael nodded. "I don't have much time to read. Most of my reading is about fishing. Only occasionally a novel. I prefer to spend more time on fishing than useless reading...if I have it to spend. So, what about these Christie and P.D. blokes?"

"Ladies, sheriff. Complex crime stories. Fiction, of course, but they read like reality. I'm a fan."

"I get it. You want to be an amateur detective, so you knew exactly what to do."

"That's it sheriff. And I thought I was doing you a favor."

"Maybe. I hope to hell those gloves you used didn't have any of your spoor on them. That would confuse the shit out of the forensics people. Now get out of here. Hardy, send the director of this fine establishment in, or we'll be eating breakfast here."

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"What do you think of the sheriff?" Annie said to Michael.

They were sitting on the same bench at the lake after breakfast, enjoying the cool breeze off the water. Michael had eaten too much and he knew it, a full English breakfast of fried eggs, bacon, toast, and jam. Annie had done a bit of oatmeal and a fruit plate.

"He'll have a tough job finding the murderer, but the case is very Christie-like. Everyone of us is a suspect. Like a full Orient Express three times as long." He had to explain what that meant. And he too looked for his own explanation: "I'm not sure I understand law enforcement divisions in your country."

"Most municipalities have their own police force; those who don't and areas outside city limits have sheriffs. There's the US Marshalls service, FBI, ATF, DEA, and so forth at the federal level."

"Um. The FBI is like our MI5, and the CIA like our MI6, I suppose?" She nodded. "What about ATF, DEA, and DHS?"

"All federal too. FBI used to handle all national policing, but now the ATF handles most stuff dealing with firearms, bombs, and so forth, DEA enforces drug laws, and DHS is specific to protecting the homeland."

"So those three also are covered by our MI5 or NCA. But back to Olson. He's here because we're not near a town?"

"That's right, just that village nearby that can't afford its own police department, I presume. But if something happened at Camp David, both the FBI and the Secret Service would be all over that."

"I thought the Secret Service only provided protection for government VIPs, like your president and vice-president?"

"They go after counterfeiters too."

"What about bitcoin scams?" he said with a smile.

"I'm not sure the government's decided who's in charge of that. Maybe the FBI?" She smiled at him.

"Okay, again back to the sheriff. What do you think of him?"

"He's a bit overwhelmed, I think. Not much crime outside city limits. Probably drunks mostly. And this county isn't nearly as big as LA County, for example, so he probably only has a small force."

"That will make his job even more difficult. We must help him."

"Don't you have a lecture to prepare?"

"I just ad lib. Besides, they might cancel the conference, for all we know. That would be a bother. I view events like these as holiday time away from students and research."

"Where do you propose to start?"

"With the bringer of ales. Are you keen on doing some investigative reporting?"

She shrugged. "Not much else I can do. They don't let me report on the events here, and they don't let me leave. That reminds me: I have to fix my car. I need to call a tow truck."

"I already got one for you. Same fellow that owns a car repair shop also tows. He'll be working on your car."

"Where?"

"At that village on the other side of the conference venue you mentioned. That's also where my ale-bringer lives. We could walk, but our hosts have bicycles we can rent too. Follow me, fair maiden. We've got some sleuthing to do."

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Even in the heat, Annie enjoyed the bike ride into the village with Michael. The gangly and awkward man was more fit than he looked. They parked and locked up their rides in front of *The Strawberry Roan*, the bar where Eduardo Benavides, the silver-haired server, worked. The saloon was dark, cool, and empty.

"Don't get much business here," Eduardo said after introductions, serving them, and joining them at the table.

"Maybe some thirsty sheriff's deputies will stop by," Annie said. "You finished with them quickly enough."

"Just the sheriff and that one deputy. I pretended I didn't know much English, although they didn't have to pretend. Their twang sounds like it came from Tennessee or even farther South. Bunch of hayseeds. Now they probably think I'm an illegal or a criminal in hiding."

"Just not their criminal," Michael said with a laugh.

"Where are you from?" said Annie.

"Colombia. I came here as a kid and became a citizen. I grew up in Queens."

"Ah, New York City, the capital of the world," Annie said with a smile. "I suppose you only spoke Spanish back then?"

"With my parents and siblings. Spanish isn't that useful around here, so we don't speak it."

"And what brought you here, may I ask?" Michael said. "I don't want to pry, but it's a bit far from New York."

"My wife is from around here. She hated the city and couldn't wait to leave it. She was trying to break into Broadway but ended up waitressing, waiting for her chance. I'm adaptable and can live anywhere, so we came back here for a while."

"Interesting," Annie said.

"You've had a few adventures. I guess you ended up liking it here."

"It's easier to make a living here. We have three kids now. They'd be lost in a big city, and frankly I like it here, except for the occasional put-downs and bullying."

"Did you know the sheriff before?" said Annie.

"He probably didn't remember me, but I had to restrain a drunk here once, and he came to take him away. That's about it, except for a wave from a distance now and then when he's here on other business. He banks over there." Eduardo pointed at the ATM kiosk at the corner of the combo gas station and convenience store.

"Where can we find Al's Auto Repairs?" said Michael. "That's where Annie's car is having surgery."

"Half a block and down a side street. Can't miss it. Looks like a junkyard."

"Handy spare parts maybe?" Michael smiled at Annie and then focused again on Eduardo. "Let's go back to that video presentation. Who set that up?"

"The boss. He only lets a few people in the main office work the AV equipment. I guess that makes sense."

"Does that include him?" Annie said.

"Of course. He did it during the showing. Maybe the sheriff will go after him a bit more than me. He deserves it. He's a skunk."

"You were just doing your job, of course," said Michael, "but did you see anyone hanging around backstage that evening? Who served drinks to the VIPs on the dais?"

"I don't know. A pitcher of ice water and glasses were left there. Place gets dry with the AC."

"The victim had a gin and tonic. The almond odor was strong, but I still smelled the usual ingredients. Any idea who served that?"

"Not really, except that it wasn't me. Five of us were serving that evening, and there were four cooks in the kitchen. Drake likes these events because he rakes in the dough, so he wants everything well covered and just right." He pulled out a pen. "Give me a napkin. I'll list everyone on duty."

Reggie Drake, the director, and Marla Peterson, the assistant director, headed the list. They were followed by the names of the four cooks and the five servers.

"Sorry, I can't offer you a list of our guests. The sheriff will have that, I suppose."

"We gave him a copy of the one we made," Michael said. "So, no problem, except for the two still missing."

"Those might be the ones here when I returned," Eduardo said. "I thought it was smart of them to escape all that boring stuff. They'd walked around the lake and then came here. I had to boot them out because I need to close at three."

"I'm amazed you got any sleep and could even get up," Annie said.

"Our little ones create noisy chaos at the crack of dawn. I generally take a siesta about now. We don't have many customers at this time."

## Chapter Five

Al looked like a character out of Mayberry. He had more hair on his face than on his crown. A heavy mustache and beard, red flannel shirt, overalls, and work boots completed the look of country bumpkin, but like Eduardo, Al seemed as pleasant as he was intelligent.

"I'll have your little car fixed up, ma'am, by the end of the day. My assistant's gone off to the nearest town for one part I need. Sorry about your troubles, but I'm not responsible for the poor road conditions around here. Most are from horse-and-buggy days, to tell the truth."

"I guess you don't have a loaner," Annie said.

"Looks like you got one," Al said, pointing at her bike and then winking at Michael.

"That don't like potholes either, though."

"Eduardo told us how to get here. Know anything about him?"

"There's only one place for drinks in our little village here, Mr. Jackson. And he's a lot fuller of hospitality than its owner. Compared to him, Eddie's all right."

"What about Reggie Drake?"

Al thought a moment and then took Michael by the arm. "Just between you and me, Drake's a damn racist. Calls Eduardo his wetback. Eduardo ain't even from Mexico. I hate that kind of shit. Drake's a lazy SOB; good people like Eduardo work three times as hard as he does. That's why I have my own shop, by the way. Management's too often snooty bastards."

"Anything in particular about Drake?" Annie said. "Run-ins with the sheriff, for example."

"All I can remember is a bit of road rage. Only got a ticket for reckless driving, though. Not enough, I'd say; he should have done some time for that. He could have killed a lady or one of her brood. I guess that shows the bastard has a temper. Think he did it?"

"Did what?"

"I'm guessing you're asking all these questions because of the murder. Word gets around. Sheriff's deputies with loose lips. Olson is okay, but his deputies ain't the brightest bulbs in the chandelier."

"Well, good chatting with you, Al," Michael said, mounting his bike.

"Is it okay if I pick my car up tomorrow morning," Annie said.

"Sure. No problem. After five days, I start charging. If that conference goes on, you can pick it up afterwards. Whatever's convenient."

"Nice fellow," Michael said as they rode out of town. "I was half-expecting a bird or two to fly out of his beard, though."

Annie laughed. "At least it looks like I'm not stranded here."

"I could always drop you home on my way to BWI. And I'm the one who's really stuck if the conference ends prematurely."

"But then my car would be here. What you can do is drop me off here if the conference is cancelled."

It wasn't. Michael had to think about his talk after all, and with an audience stressed out from a murder investigation.

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Michael's lecture was the last of the next morning's. Fox and others who had built on his radical ideas would follow in the afternoon after a long lunch break. Annie and he decided to return to the village, driving this time in his rental car, to check on hers again, if anything to motivate Al to speed up things. While she visited the repair garage, he checked around town.

At one point, he noticed an old wrinklie staring at him. He'd just spoken to a woman who ran a gift shop that obviously catered to attendees at any conference going on at the center, selling local souvenirs featuring sites one could visit around the area, although he doubted those featuring Camp David wouldn't be considered tourist sites. The man confronted him.

"You gotta be one of them eggheads from that conference. You sound like some kind of damn foreigner, though," the old man said to Michael. "You're not welcome here. If I had my shotgun, I might just blow your damn head off."

Even at a distance of four feet, Michael could detect the whiskey-breath. "Then you'd probably die in prison sir. Could I ask you a few questions?"

"Don't like no questions. Strangers like you came here to ask me to get one of those damn shots. Came here too to give all them damn socialists in DC stuff 'bout my family. Now you askin' around. None of it's any of your or their damn business, I say. I watched them Taliban take over there in 'Ghanistan. We got ourselves plenty of guns in this country. We should do that here. Run them commies right out of DC, I say."

Michael held up both hands, palms forward, and backed away. "Okay sir. Peace. Have a good day now."

He turned towards the repair shop and saw that Annie and Al had been watching the altercation.

"Don't mind ol' Zebadiah, lad," Al said to Michael. "He's got moonshine for brains. Thinks like a lot of stupid people, but he gets worse with the drink. Sheriff keeps an eye on him. Damn fool ran some hikers off his land once. Shot at them. Good thing his eyesight's bad now. Can't aim that shotgun of his very well."

"Good lord! Why isn't he in a mental institution?" Annie looked indignant.

"Don't have those around here. Sheriff has other problems...like a murder at your conference."

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Michael decided to attend some lectures, Jonathon Fox's among them. He listened to a few on black holes as a way to be more current in that field, if only to motivate him in his lifetime goal to create a reasonable theory of quantum gravity, which he was sure required more particle physics techniques than Einstein's classical general relativity. Dora Fox's talk on recent experimental results was quite helpful in that regard.

Jonathon had known Michael was in the audience. He glanced once at Michael, gave a little head bow, and then ignored him. He seemed nervous. *Probably the mixed UK-US nature of the crowd*, Michael thought. *Or is he nervous because he began with a slide show while sitting at the same table where McAdams sat?* Michael hadn't considered that when he gave his talk.

After the slide show, Jonathon stood to go on with his presentation but jumped when Eduardo appeared from backstage to bring a pitcher of water and a glass. He watched as Jonathon poured himself a glass, hand shaking, sniffed it, and then drank. *Can't blame the bloke*, Michael thought with a smile.

The rest of his talk was excellent and went into details Michael hadn't seen before. It was comforting to know that someone had taken his results and expanded upon them. *That's science in action*.

He now looked around the audience to see if Annie was there. She should be pleased with the lecture too. Jonathon had been her first interviewee. Michael wondered when she'd interview him. That might be awkward. She looked for background details, trying to make the scientist appear more like a normal human being. He knew he wasn't in the latter category; he'd never been. Sometimes he regretted that.

## Chapter Six

The next morning, after a walk with Annie around the lake, they split up to perform their sleuthing tasks. She would busy herself with probing into the backgrounds of conference staff. The director, Reggie Drake, for example, was a surly man who might have disliked McAdams's autocratic organizational style. Michael did the same for conference participants, in particular fellow scientists from the UK and competitors in McAdams's esoteric area of research.

Michael calculated that someone had harbored a lot of hate against the victim. Dora Fox caught his eye. Her number of research articles was larger than her husband's even though she was younger and had focused on the experimental side of black hole research. Such experiments often took years, but new data often led to a string of articles with surprising results.

She was only one of many researchers who authored those papers; they were always listed in alphabetical order because the groups were large. McAdams was a member of a few of those research teams, initially as a consultant for the earlier articles, Michael supposed, and later on probably just because he had a Nobel prize?

He risked entering a *cul de sac* if he first focused on Dora Fox, but he decided to talk to Jonathon because he knew him better. He found the old chap in the cafeteria, sipping a cuppa'.

"I find it surprising Yanks can brew up a good mash, don't you, Michael? Are you continuing to annoy that old sheriff with all your sleuthing?"



"There are so many suspects, that poor plod can't help but be overwhelmed." *And even if checking your wife's background is a waste of time, I'm doing the sheriff a service!* "Annie and I decided to help him, whether he wants our assistance or not."

"I'm certain that's not what Dora had in mind when she said she was going to try to get you and that reporter together," he said with a smile. "And it's a bit conceited on your part because you're only playing detective. But I do agree the poor bloke doesn't have the manpower to run a proper investigation."

"That's the spirit. Say, I noticed that Dora did some research with McAdams. He had such an abrasive personality, I wondered how he got along with other researchers on those experimental teams, including Dora."

"I can only speak to her later experiences where fortunately his affiliation was a purely formal and honorary one. You know the drill: Hire a Nobel prize winner to give a research-oriented department some status. Same thing goes for research teams."

"Indeed. So, you know nothing about her earlier experiences with McAdams?"

"Not directly. Lots were long before our marriage. She confided that she was in awe of the great man early on. I think they even dated at one point. She broke it off when she realized he only used women, especially young ones who thought he was a god."

"Interesting. Do you think she'd open up to me about those earlier experiences?"

"Not likely. She'd probably consider them none of your damn business. She's tried to get past them and put them out of mind. I encouraged her to do that, of course. Life is too short to dwell on the past, especially if the memories are uncomfortable ones. She would resent your prying, I'm sure."

*Maybe better mine than Sheriff Olson's? He'll eventually get around to looking into all our pasts, although that might occur after we've gone home.*

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Annie walked out of Drake's office fuming. She'd faked her reasons for interviewing him as she'd done with most everyone, saying it was all about "color" for the article she'd be writing about the important conference. That was only a small lie, of course; she'd write that damn story she'd originally planned but put in all the sordid details.

She'd already interviewed the secretary on duty who worked for both the director and his assistant director, Marla Peterson, the woman who'd registered them. Both secretaries were temps and only came in when events occurred. The one not currently on duty stopped her in the corridor after Annie closed the door. She'd wanted to slam it.

"I know what you're doing," the secretary said in a whisper. Even with that low voice, Annie detected the southern drawl. "And I applaud it. I want to share my thoughts."

"Is there somewhere else we can talk. Deborah, isn't it?" The woman nodded. Annie jerked a thumb back toward the main office door. "They're a bit too close, and I want you to feel comfortable."

"It's Debby. Debby Trent. Women's restroom."

She headed away along the corridor; Annie followed. When Annie entered the modern bathroom with four stalls, Debby locked the door behind her. "I don't want that bitch to interrupt us."

Annie knew she must be referring to Marla, her immediate superior, and not the other secretary, who'd already said that Drake and his assistant often picked on the two temps, even calling Debby a fat hillbilly, among other things.

"Understood. I'll interview Marla in a bit, so anything you say might help me. Your co-worker already indicated a few items of interest."

"Polite words for what those two do. Confidential conversation?"

"You bet."

Debby added to the other temp's tale of woe, going on about how Drake and his assistant treated the center's staff like dirt, slaves to do their bidding, and how late-night trysts between the two, mostly in the main office, were not about planning but were for sex. She said it was a sin before God how they carried on, a violation of their wedding vows.

Even allowing that some sentiments were from a disgruntled employee—employees, if Debby was representing the others—and that she had a prudish holier-than-thou attitude, Annie thought most of the woman's claims were founded in fact.

She went to discuss her findings with Michael, who was waiting for her in the cafeteria.

## Chapter Seven

"First off," Annie told Michael, "Drake is a misogynist prick. He thinks women belong in the home where they make things comfortable for the lord of the manor and raise his children, preferably sons who will carry on the family name."

"Sounds a bit like the Taliban or some other extreme religious sect from the Dark Ages. Or like British toffs, for that matter."

"Or like our own SBC."

Michael didn't know what that was. "He really said all that?"

"More or less, skirting around a bit to feel out my compliance, as if I were his adoring mistress."

Michael, who'd been thinking that Annie might have accused him of harboring similar sentiments at one time, focused on the mistress, assuming such a person existed.

"Any idea who she might be?"

"The body language was obvious, and I had independent confirmation from one of Drake's secretaries, Debby Trent. His second-in-command thinks he's Einstein and Sir Lancelot all rolled into one person. She fawns over him. And that secretary said there's a lot of late-night sex games going on between old Drake and Marla, who are both married to other people."

"Interesting. Our Mr. Drake is a complex character. Any ideas about why he might have wanted to murder McAdams? Surely not because McAdams discovered the frolicking."

"Both secretaries said that Drake and McAdams were like oil and water, two conceited asses going at each other like young bucks in rut butting heads, although both men are old has-beens. McAdams won the day but only by threatening to take the conference elsewhere. I suppose Drake swallowed his pride in order to receive the riches coming his way from hosting the conference."

"Not McAdams's funds in any case. It was probably easy to sell the idea to those sponsors shown on that one slide at the opening ceremonies that this was an important scientific conference. McAdams's name alone might have been enough. And he probably had several other possible venues as backups. I heard Dora mention San Diego the first night. He was a visiting professor at UCSD once."

"Putting it that way, what would be Drake's motive?"

Michael smiled and shrugged. "You're right. The conference was a done deal. But maybe Drake wanted a bit of revenge too? If so, McAdams didn't win that battle. And possibly Dora Fox did the dirty deed for Drake?"

Michael started to tell her what he'd learned about Dora's background, but Annie interrupted.

"Don't look now, but here comes the sheriff, and he looks mad enough to spit nails."

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Sheriff Olson joined them at their table uninvited, ignored Annie, and stared at Michael. "I hate to interrupt your nice little teatime tryst with Miss Gillis, Professor Jackson, but I have a bone to pick with you."

"I'm parsing that expression and concluding I've upset you in some way, sheriff."

"You're fucking right I'm upset. You've been dancing around asking everyone questions like you were Sherlock Holmes on steroids. I'm here to put a stop to that. If you don't, you'll be our guest in the county jail."

"I didn't know it was against the law in this great state to ask people questions."

"So now you're pretending to be a damn lawyer as well? The legal term is obstructing justice. You're getting in the way of my investigation."

Annie piped up. "Aren't you just angry because we haven't shared the information we've gathered with you sheriff? We wanted to help because you're understaffed, but you haven't exactly been accessible of late so we could exchange information."

Olson glared at her. "I never share information with the media."

"Then we have no obligation to share it with you," Michael said with a smile.

Now Olson's face had turned from red to purple. Michael thought he might have a heart attack. The man was overweight after all. Annie sipped her coffee and Michael his tea as they waited for the sheriff to calm down enough to speak. To aid in that process, Michael offered him a tea biscuit and Annie poured him a mug of coffee from her own carafe.

He finally bit into the biscuit. "Um. Not bad. Coconut flavored." He dipped it into his coffee, took another bite, and sighed. "Okay, you two. There are some things I can't tell you—mostly private stuff about participants and staff's lives that don't have anything to do with the case at hand. Otherwise, let's share. I'll start."

His spiel amounted to list of more than a dozen people who had exhibited animosity toward McAdams, if not hatred. The list included Dora Fox, but not Reggie Drake, because he'd not yet interviewed the director. McAdams was very demanding, even more so than the director, he'd been told, but he had yet to confirm that with Drake.

"I'm tempted to write them all off as sour grapes—jealousy for the scientists, disgruntled employees for the staff. We have no smoking guns."

"Pardon?" Michael said. "McAdams was killed by cyanide."

"As you were very quick to point out. I'll accept that you can know something about poisons by reading those damn mystery novels, but maybe you learned what you know for some other purpose?"

"I only knew McAdams by reputation," Michael said. "We work in different areas, and, at the time we came to the conference, we were working for different universities. I'm your least likely suspect."

"Michael, the sheriff used smoking gun metaphorically," Annie said. "He means there's no evidence to implicate any of his suspects. Or you, for that matter."

"Thank you, little miss know-it-all," Olson said. "Of course, that's what I meant. Now, what do you two have to share, if anything?"

They summarized what they'd learned. When they'd finished, the sheriff thought a bit.

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"If I put together what you said with what we have," Olson said, "it seems that Professor Dora Fox and Director Reggie Drake are now the prime suspects, more so than the others on my list. How do I pin the crime on one of them?"

"Or on any others on or off the list," Michael said. "We can nick the murderer by considering motives and methods. Because the motives aren't obvious, let's consider the methods. The trick with the carbon monoxide seems to require prior knowledge of the conference facilities, thus indicating Drake or some other staff member, presumably the first, who disliked McAdams immensely. The use of cyanide does too, but only in the sense that the director had prior knowledge about how the opening day's activities were organized, along with McAdams. How much CO and CN ion to use is more specialized knowledge that Drake might not have had."

"He could certainly google it," Annie said.

"Dora Fox could have access to all those things that way too, if she didn't already know them," the sheriff said. "Or anyone else. Um. I suppose all sorts of chemicals are needed to keep up these lovely grounds." The sheriff was looking through the window at the well-landscaped rear gardens. "Maybe they have a problem with rats here?"

"Potassium cyanide can be used to poison rats," Michael said, nodding. "Most rat poison today consists of brodifacoum, a super-anticoagulant. They bleed to death inside."

"Ick." Annie made a face. "I suppose they'd have the latter here. The other seems too dangerous."

"Cyanide can be found naturally too, in almonds, for example."

"You'd need a lot of almonds," said Olson.

"Precisely. It's probably easier to get a good supply from purifying old rat poison. A bit of work, I dare say, but not as much work as using almonds. I think you have a good idea, sheriff. I suggest we check the sheds here that the landscapers use. As I understand it, this site was once an operating farm."

"A lot of old places around here contain a lot of old crap," said the sheriff, nodding. "Two years ago, a fellow bought a farm and found a complete still in the barn. Consider the health hazard of rot-gut moonshine without counting the fire hazard. The previous owner had died, though, and not from that."

"Wouldn't finding old-style rat poison in one of the sheds implicate Drake?" Annie said.

"Not necessarily. Someone had to discover it and use a bit. Most likely Drake, possibly through an employee who asked about getting rid of it, but it could just as well be Dora if the shed wasn't used that often. Finding it would clear up that one method. Circumstantial evidence, though. We need the motive."

"And the person who had it," the sheriff added. "Still, I like my idea too. First things first. I'll have my deputies check the sheds and talk to the landscapers."

## Chapter Eight

They had interviewed two members of the landscaping service that tended to the conference center's grounds, but they had to wait until the end of the day to get them all together. Their boss came with them, a burly man who dwarfed his employees.

"These fellows don't even know what a physicist is," Lloyd Richards said to Olson. "I'm not sure I even do. I've heard of black holes, though."

"Good for you, Mr. Richards," Olson said. "We're not checking IDs or immigration status, you know. And we'll be interviewing you too."

"I'm never here. Got a contracting business too. Me and my son." He downed half his glass of lemonade. "You know, they're here legally. Damn good workers too. And I wouldn't let you near them if they weren't legal. We hassle these people who flee them awful countries far too much."

Olson smiled. "I don't have any friends in ICE, and I don't really care where your laborers come from. We have a murder to solve. Period. Now are they all here?" He eyed the four sitting forlorn, waiting for the deputies to get organized.

"Can't find the fifth guy, Arturo. He's not at home. Missus says he often gets drunk and sleeps it off in his car somewhere."

"I don't have the personnel to go looking for him. Does he have a cell phone?"

"He does. Doesn't mean it's on. He's sort of the foreman for this crew. Real reliable guy. I'll chew on his ass as soon as I can find him."

Two sheriff's deputies were questioning the landscapers. The other two were inspecting the different tool and supply sheds. They found Arturo.

The case had its second murder victim.

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"It's clear that Mr. Sanchez knew too much," Michael told Annie.

"Poor man. And think of his family."

"In the UK, we have family liaison officers. FLOs, we call them. Do you think the sheriff's department has someone like that?"

"Probably. I hope so. Maybe I should go see her?"

"It would be better to let them handle it. I'll mention it to the sheriff. But maybe we should both go. I know some Spanish."

"They speak perfect English, Michael. They've been living here for years, like Eduardo."

"Oh. Sorry. Still, I'll mention it to the police."

"Did McAdams have any close relatives?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't know him that well. Perhaps Dora knows."

"She's a suspect."

"Right. Here comes Sheriff Olson."

The sheriff accepted another mug of coffee from Annie. "Well, our little discussion paid off. One of the landscapers said he discovered some old rat poison. Arturo said he'd get rid of it. I'm thinking someone also had discovered it and snitched some just before he did that. We now have both methods figured out."

"How was Arturo killed?"

"Potting knife in the gut. Maybe that excludes Dora Fox?"

"Maybe," Michael said. "She looks like a strong woman, though. With enough hate...? Of course, the director is probably a strong man too, stronger than Dora is, I dare say. Or it could be anyone else here."

"Maybe the owner of the landscaping company," said the sheriff. "He's burly enough to down a bull with his index finger, just like one of those bullfighters."

"And what motive would he have to murder McAdams?" Annie said.

"Got me there. From what I know about him, I can't see him even acknowledging any scientist's existence."

"So...what are your next steps, sheriff?" Michael said.

"Grill Dora Fox and Reggie Drake some more. Stay out of it, professor."

"Yes sir."

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"You won't, will you?" Annie said to Michael after the sheriff left them.

"While he grills those two—I have to guess at what that means—I'm going to question Jonathon again. Perhaps he's covering for his wife. Want to join me? You can be the good copper; I'll be the bad one."

"It's not a game, Michael, or one of those mystery novels you like to read. This is serious business. Until they find the culprit, we're all in danger."

"Yes, poor Arturo proves that latter point. I was simply referring to a trick plods often employ in interrogations."

"If you mean police, I understand that. They do that here too."

They found Jonathon in his room. "The sheriff is questioning Dora, thanks to you," Jonathon told Michael. "You couldn't leave well enough alone!"

"You covered for her well, but most of what happened between her and McAdams is in the public record, sir."

"I suppose," Jonathon sighed. "You might as well come in. I shall not add to the information I divulged in our private conversation, though, emphasis on private."

He gestured to the small sofa and he took a seat in the wing chair. Their room was larger than either Annie's or Michael's. That made sense to Michael: Jonathon shared the room with Dora.

"I suppose you know about that poor landscaper. We should take up a collection for his family."

"That would indeed be a nice gesture, and yes we know. In one of the storage sheds, there was some old rat poison, the potassium cyanide kind. Apparently, someone discovered it before Arturo could get rid of it."

"Is there evidence for that? It could have been purified to poison McAdams."

"Precisely. Arturo makes notes. There were originally ten five-pound bags, but he only found nine when he went to destroy them."

Jonathon frowned. "A careful little twit, wasn't he? Who took that tenth bag? I don't suppose he jotted that down in his notes."

"There's the rub, Jonathon. So, we turn to motive. Both Dora and the director had strong motives for killing McAdams."

"That's what the sheriff thinks anyway," Annie said.

Michael smiled at her. She was trying to soften Michael's almost accusatory statement.

"Dora lost all interest in the man, or revenge, for that matter, years ago. And apparently he thought she had too. He invited her to this conference, after all. They work in the same area."

"Perhaps McAdams wanted to meet the man she eventually married? Or, to approach her again?"

Jonathon turned red. "Of course not. True, I didn't know him from Adam, if you pardon the pun, but the years had passed for him too."

"Sometimes the passing of years only intensifies hatred," Michael said. "Tell me, Jonathon, did you know about Dora and McAdams's relationship before she told you?"

The redness increased. "What if I did?"

"I'll take that as a yes. When she told you, did Dora still seem to have feelings for McAdams despite the way he'd treated her?"

"Why are you querying me like this? I don't have to tell you anything."

"Indeed. But the sheriff might not be so gentle. Your confession today makes you a suspect as much as your wife. Perhaps you worked as a team. Were you the one who killed Arturo?"

Jonathon stood and pointed to the door. "Get out!"

In the hall outside after Jonathon slammed the door behind them, Annie faced Michael. "That was a bit over the top, don't you think?"

Michael smiled at her. "You witnessed what he said. And what I said is true. In fact, Dora might not have had anything to do with either murder. I'm convinced Jonathon committed both."

"We have no proof."

"No, but we should tell Sheriff Olson what we've learned."

## Chapter Nine

Annie and Michael intercepted the sheriff before he interrogated Dora. They found him in the cafeteria, perhaps recovering from his meeting with Drake.

"We had an interesting chat with Dora's husband," Michael said as he and Annie took seats across the table from Olson.

"Damn it! I told you to stop meddling." He sighed. "Considering you two were practically running, what did you find out?"

Michael told the sheriff his theory.

"Do you agree with that, Ms. Gillis?" the sheriff asked Annie.

She shrugged. "It's a theory that might make more sense than accusing Dora."

"Um. Possibly. Question is: Does she know her husband did it?"

"Or helped him do it," said Annie.

"In the first case, you might get her to tell you," said Michael. "In the second, she probably won't admit to anything."

"That's true. And in both cases, I'd still like some proof."

"I'm guessing they haven't worn their fancy evening clothes since the opening ceremonies. One set might have rat poison residuals on it. Your SOCOs wouldn't have had any reason to test clothes originally."

"My what? Oh yeah. CSI guys. I'm going to need a warrant. I'll get a deputy to get a county judge to issue one. Meanwhile, I'll go ahead and interview Dora. That's already set." He eyed them but looked daggers at Michael. "Any more meddling and I'll toss you both in jail, understand?"

"Yes sir. You can find us here after the interview." Michael flashed an innocent smile.

"Not attending the lectures, I take it?"

"I'm only somewhat interested in black holes. I'm guessing that's why Dora's interview is later; she'll be attending them. I'm really interested in this case."

"Too damn interested for your own good!"

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Michael got antsy and couldn't sit that long waiting for Olson.

"Shall we take a walk?" he said to Annie. "The sheriff could take forever. He isn't Usain Bolt by any means."

Annie smiled. "I'm surprised you know who Usain Bolt is."

"Lightning Bolt is Jamaican. That's almost English. I was always a fan. He looks a bit like me."

"Tall and lanky, you mean. I don't suppose you can run like him."

"Heavens no. You didn't answer my question."

Annie thought a moment. "One of us should stay here and wait for the sheriff. Be careful. There might be a thunderstorm brewing, speaking of lightning."

"I'll stay close to this building just in case. We're used to rain in England, though."

"Okay. Go do your walk, but don't take too long."

As he walked out the door, Michael wondered if he was growing on Annie. He hadn't been seriously interested in a woman for a while. When friends asked, he always said he was waiting for the right one. Sure, he'd had a few flings, but those women had turned out not to be the right one.

Annie was different. *With her in the US and me in the UK, that would really be a long-distance relationship!* He wasn't looking forward to the end of the conference when they would have to go their separate ways. *Maybe I should mix a little more and convince one of the Americans to offer me a visiting professorship?* He was as important in his own field as McAdams had been in his when he was invited to UCSD. *UCSD? That would cut the distance in half at least. Or maybe that would be about the same distance?*

He wandered around the front gardens a bit, thinking about Annie and a possible future with the American woman. *Could it work?* The front gardens weren't nearly as extensive as the back, so he was soon on his third lap, although the maze through the shrubbery and flowers allowed him to vary his routes. As he neared the main building again, he spotted Jonathon Fox running, briefcase in hand. He was heading towards his hire-car and sped up when he saw Michael running to head him off. They met at the hire-car.

"Going somewhere?" Michael said, breathing a lot easier than Jonathon.

"None of your fucking business! Get away from me!"

He swung the briefcase at Michael, who decked the older man.

"I'll sue you, you upstart prat!" Jonathon said from the ground. "I'll turn you into a pauper and make sure you never have a position in the UK again."

Michael eyed the two deputies running towards them. "Perhaps. You can tell it to the law."

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"So, Dora must have told you something key," Annie said to Olson in the cafeteria.

Dora and Jonathon Fox were now in county jail. The deputies had driven off with them as if they were common criminals.

"She broke down. Said her hubby lost it and planned the whole thing to kill McAdams. Poor Arturo was just collateral damage, as the CIA would say." Olson smiled. "I guess she realized the jig was up."

"Isn't that a dance?" Michael said. "I understand Appalachian people brought it here from Ireland. I fail to understand, though, what it has to do with Dora's confession."

Olson winked at Annie, who sighed. "The case isn't finished. We have her confession. We need his. She put most of the blame on her husband. His story might be different."

"I'm sure a judge and jury can work it out if they are. Did the SOCOs find any rat poison dust on their clothes?"

"Just on Professor Fox's suit. Probably there since he purified the rat poison. Turns out he also has a master's in chemistry. Did you know that?"

Michael was astonished. "I had no idea. He certainly didn't advertise it. Although he wouldn't, I suppose. The doctorate is a higher degree, and he's more famous for his work in physics, to put it mildly."

"All done for now, I guess." Olson stood, so Annie and Michael did too. "Thank you both. You're not exactly Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, but you helped a lot, even if you were annoying me. And Miss Annie, thanks for the coffee again. Keep in touch, you two."

Olson spun on his heels and walked out of the cafeteria.

"He still has a lot of work to do," Michael said, "but he definitely has a feather in his cap for this one."

Annie nodded. "Are you going to any lectures the rest of the afternoon?"

"No. My channeling Usain Bolt left me a bit knackered, to be honest. I was just going to go and sit down by the lake again and relax."

"I'll join you. We have a few things to talk about."

"We do?" She smiled at him. "Yes, I suppose we do."

## **The Consultant**

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#### **Preface**

Back in the sixties, smaller police departments in Britain used Scotland Yard consultants a lot more, especially for murder investigations. Nowadays most cities have various teams for crimes, drug interdiction, vice, and even counterterrorism, but they still call in consultants. This British-style mystery considers one such pairing.

#### **Chapter One**

Inspector Nathan Ames was a bit apprehensive. A case was stumping his Mancunian team, and his super and DCI had conspired against him by bringing in a consultant from Scotland Yard. There was some logic for that, Nathan had to admit, because his case was similar to one that had stumped the Yard as well.

He was dressed in his work clothes—white shirt without tie, suit off the rack, and inexpensive but comfortable shoes. He usually shaved every other day, but today was different because of the apprehension: The consultant was a female inspector known to be as tough as nails.

He stood on the train platform waiting for DI Katherine Sanborn. He knew she would be a strong woman—she had to be, working in the man's world of policing—and from her file he knew she was a striking woman about his age with a reputation for being intolerant of mistakes. Considering their equal ranks, he expected a few professional barneys to be in their future. *But it's my team, not hers!*

He spotted her immediately when she stepped down from the train car, a red-head dressed in a dark green power-suit with a suitcase on wheels in tow. She seemed to have a broomstick up her back. *At least she's not riding one!*

He'd have to look at the positive side. The Yard already had experience pursuing this serial killer, this Archer. That could be useful for his own investigation, even if Katherine was a witch.

"Welcome to Manchester, Inspector Sanborn," he said to her as he neared the tall woman. He offered a handshake.

"I use first names, Nathan," she said, shaking his hand. Her grip was light and polite, her hand cool to the touch.

*Mistake #1*, he thought. *Let's see how far informality will get you with my team!*

"How was your trip?" he said.

*Mistake #2?* The frown on her face told him she wasn't into small talk.

"I was trying to review case notes while being surrounded by a couple and their two screaming, young children. I'll say no more."

"Your hotel or the station, Katherine?"

"The latter. I want to get right to work. The less time I spend in Manchester, the better."

That puzzled Nathan. *Bad experiences with Manchester?*

"The city can be a bit too much at times," he said. "And the football hooligans for Manchester City or Manchester United can get carried away." *Oops! More small talk!*

"I hate football. I used to like archery until now."

Now Nathan only expected the worse. She was as unhappy about being in the city as he was about having her. *At least we can share that sentiment somewhat.*

They were both silent until he pulled into the car park between the police station and its impound yard.

"I'll just leave my luggage in the vehicle. You or someone else can drive me to my hotel after work. I want to meet your team."

It was early Monday morning, so Nathan doubted all the team would be in house.

"Let's get you sorted in my office first."

"Your office?"

"You're our guest. I thought you would be more comfortable using my office while you're here."

"Forget that. I'll sit with your team."

By that time, they were inside and she'd been surveilling the mostly empty and open common space in the CID the sergeants and constables used.

"Sure you won't reconsider? It can become a bit noisy in here."

"Seems like there are plenty of desks to choose from."

"Many of them empty, yes. Budget cuts, you know. Not luxurious real estate either."

"I'm not a member of the royal family, Nathan. I prefer to be with your team. I'm part of that team while I'm here." She smiled. He liked the smile; it seemed genuine. *But is there a hidden agenda?* "That way I can keep track of everyone." *And there it is!*

"What about me?" He returned the smile, thinking he could gain some points.

"I believe your super and DCI do a good job doing that. Isn't that why I'm here?"

He inwardly groaned. "The Yard isn't doing so well with their case either."

"Touché. So, let's consider my stay here as a desperate plan the VIPs hatched in order to solve a case—and I believe it's just one—that the public and media are up in arms about, at least in London."

He noticed she was studying a short man who was approaching them. "DS Stanford Battle," she said in a whisper.

"Do you know my sergeant?"

"From college days." She held out her hand. "Stan, good to see you again."

Battle beamed. "Likewise. Welcome, Kathy. Has the Guv shown you around?"

"Not yet. I'm sorting out where I'd like to sit first."

"There's plenty of desks to choose from." He glanced at Ames. "But weren't you going to sublet your office, Guv?"

"Change of plans, at Katherine's request. She wants to sit with you plods."

"Where do you sit, Stan?" she said.

"We've formed a little cluster between me and the constables. There are a few desks available there too." He glanced at Nathan. "Shall I escort her?"

"Be my guest. Once you're sorted, Katherine, bring my sergeant along to my office. We need to bring you up to date."

"A new murder?" she said.

"Good guess. The Archer's an excellent shot with his damn arrows. Two a.m. or thereabouts with fog and no moon, and he still hits his target."

"An assassin who channels the ancient hunter Orion. We need to discover who he's hunting. What the victims in London and here have in common might tell us. I want to append our list to yours."

## Chapter Two

Merging the London and Manchester lists brought immediate results of sorts. Battle stuck his head into Ames's office. "You have to see this, Guv."

The two joined Sanborn at her desk. She had a picture the pathologist's aide had taken of the new victim on her laptop screen. She blew it up, focusing on one arm.

"We have eighty percent of a tattoo here. I was able to reference it. It's a common one among the Royal Highlanders. Turns out all the victims were all part of that outfit, your list and ours."

"With the same tattoos?" Ames said.

"Of course not. Only a few even had tattoos beyond the usual Romeo-loves-Juliet ink work. But that's what the victims have in common. Perhaps our Archer was in the Royal Highlanders too?"

"Can we get a list of that regiment's personnel, past and present?"

"Stan's working on that. It's not much to go on, but it's something."

"Damn right!" Ames said. "Good work. But they don't call this bloke the Archer for nothing. I doubt the Highlanders fight now with bows and arrows."

"Good point. Any ideas?"

Ames thought a moment. "Maybe someone channeling an ancient Scottish avenger? A serial killer who doesn't like kilts?"

Sanborn smiled. "I might accept the first suggestion, but not the second."

"Could be someone who feels he was discharged unfairly or who was never accepted into the regiment," Battle ventured.

Ames glanced at him. "Show off."

"Now those two ideas are better, but all three would be hard to use to find the Archer."

Ames dared to ignore her and said to Battle, "We lucked out with this last victim. Happened on a city street. Let's check CCTV files again. Shopping centers, wherever. Damn bow and arrow shouldn't be hard to spot."

"We've never seen them in London," Sanborn said, "and we have a lot more cameras there."

"Do all the arrows match, yours and ours? Maybe we just have copycat-killer up here. You folks in London generated a lot of publicity about the Archer down there."

"Um, we'll merge that part of the forensic records too. Good idea. Aren't computers wonderful?" Sanborn winked at Ames.

*Does she know I hate them?* he thought.

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The arrows all matched for those victims where a photo of the arrow had been taken. Tentative conclusion: There was only one Archer who had moved from London to Manchester, something that wasn't that uncommon as people moved about for jobs, especially after the pandemic where hiring and salaries were all over the board.

They winnowed the list of Highlanders down to soldiers whose ages matched the average age of the victims. That was still a lot of potential victims and persons of interest, some of them in Manchester and a few left in the London area, but most were in Scotland, which made sense.

"Let's focus on the ones in Manchester," Ames said in his office to Battle and Sanborn late that afternoon.

"Agreed," Sanborn said. "That's twenty-three people. Do we have enough personnel to interview them all?"

"We need just one who remembers a disgruntled soldier who likes archery," Ames said with a growl, "but yes, we can cover them if you and I help Stan and the DCs out."

"It's risky to do that singly," Battle said.

"And to team up, you're risking getting two coppers killed," said Sanborn. "It doesn't take that long to shoot two arrows instead of one. We should plot their locations and divide them up geographically."

"Do you know Manchester that well?" said Ames.

"I was born here, Nathan. It hasn't changed that much."

*Damn, he thought. I should have seen that in her record. Mistake #3.*

"Sorry," he said. "I hadn't noticed that. And it might have changed. The football crowds seem a lot rowdier now."

She laughed. "That's true. Can we get a map?"

### Chapter Three

Ames was knackered and dragging his feet a bit by the time he knocked on the fourth door. He hadn't done so much walking since he was on patrol in London.

The house was a tidy cottage in the near-in suburbs and easily accessible by train. It was well-cared for, including the ubiquitous front rose garden that was all pruned and ready for the winter. A woman came to the door. He showed his warrant card.

"I'm looking for Angus MacDonald," he said. "Is he home?"

"You'd better come in, Inspector."

As he followed her through the house, he said, "Are you Mrs. MacDonald?"

"I'm his sister, Devon. He lives with us now."

There seemed to be a weariness in that last statement. She led him to a small sitting room that looked out upon another garden and a small patch of lawn.

"Angus, this plod's here to talk with ye. I'll go fetch some tea."

The man in the wheelchair turned towards Ames, a frown upon his scarred face.

"I know why you're here."

Ames took a chair opposite the veteran. "Why don't you tell me why I'm here?"

There was a thin smile. "It has to be Bobbie Ferguson. The little shite washed out after the first week and left cursing all of us, promising to get back at the regiment."

Ames took out a small notebook and biro and jotted down the name. "You've heard we're looking for a man who's killing ex-members of the Royal Highlanders?"

"Some of our lads in London called me. Then three of ours were killed here. That got most of us thinking, it did."

"Four now...in the Manchester area."

Angus asked for the fourth's name; he looked sad when Ames gave it to him. Ames didn't feel that was incorrect. The last murder would soon be in media reports, adding to the Archer's fame. *Or is it infamy?*

"All good men, Inspector, all good men. We fought like hell and had each other's backs." There was a tremor in his voice.

"Seems like washing out wouldn't cause that much of a grudge."

"There are grudges and then there are hates and jealousies." The veteran slipped a bit back into dialect. "Nae, you dinnae ken that little weasel. Tried to make everyone else look bad, he did, and grassed on everyone to the drill sergeants. Then he'd pout and get upset like a wee bairn because we ignored him. Frankly, if he be the Archer, we should've made him have a little accident during training maneuvers, ken? I mean, look at me. Did my duty and 'ave nothing to show for it. Was lucky to have Devon; she and her man took me in. I lost my house and my wife who got tired of caring for an invalid."

"You only have the pension for your service? No provision for being wounded?"

"A wee bit more for the latter. Casualty pay. Still wasn't enough to pay a mortgage and feed a family, ken?" Anger now made the scars livid. "Catch that wee bastard Ferguson. He's the one! He's nae rights at all to do what he's doin'." Angus thought a moment. "I suppose we were lucky in some sense."

"In what way?"

"Can you imagine that little whiny toad having your back in combat? Would've done a runner while pissing his pants. He just thought that signing up was all about glory to be had. Stupid little yob."

They had tea together and talked. Ames left the house liking and respecting Angus MacDonald.

He tried out Angus's theory on the next two Highlanders he visited. They didn't take long to agree with Angus.

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After the canvassing blitz, they met in a pub near the station for drinks and dinner—the two DIs, Sanborn and Ames; DS Battle; and three DCs from Ames's team—two others who were married had gone home to a late dinner with their families. All those in the pub had been left knackered by their efforts.

While waiting for their meals and over drinks, they compared notes. Battle had queried the married constables at the station, so he had their input. Battle and Ames and a constable had results from their efforts; Sanborn and the rest didn't.

"This Robert Ferguson bloke seems like a promising suspect," she said. "Too bad those Highlanders don't know his whereabouts."

"No reason for them to know," Ames said. "He never got into the regiment."

"Which might make him a disgruntled chappie. Ferguson sounds like a good Scottish name. Let's see if he has family there, shall we?" Sanborn said, looking around the group.

"Good Scottish name might mean he's from a large clan," Battle said.

"Maybe we'll ring Police Scotland to get them to help," Ames said. "I don't fancy a trip up there. Old Reekie is wet and cold this time of year."

"So's Glasgow," Battle said.

"Aberdeen's colder," one of the constables said.

Sanborn laughed and winked at DC Heath, the only other female in the group. "What a bunch of tough men, right, Laurie? What do you say?"

"Police Scotland will pay us no mind unless someone accompanies your and Inspector Ames's request with a visit."

"Which is why you and I should go. We'll charm the Celts into cooperating. Ah, here's sustenance."

Ames wasn't sure he agreed on that course of action, especially because Ferguson was probably still in Manchester, especially if Angus and other veteran Highlanders in the area were still targets, but he tucked in like everyone else. He'd limited himself to a half of cold lager, though, so he had to accompany his meal with water.

Later, after everyone left exhausted except for Sanborn and Ames, also exhausted but mellowing out in the cubbyhole for four they'd taken over, the latter eyed the consultant and smiled.

"You're fitting in rather well, Katherine. I'll admit when we first met, I wondered. Most of my team aren't Londoners or Mancunians."

"Makes no difference to me, so you had no need to worry. As long as coppers do their jobs, I'm good. And here we are. You're from London and I'm from here. It's a strange world."

"Indeed. Have another?" He pointed to her glass where the ale was almost gone. "I can drive you to your hotel later."

"I counted a half-pint gone in your case, so maybe I should still sort a taxi. Wrong way for you anyway. Let's do some coffee instead. That should balance things out for me."

He nodded. "I meant what I said, you know. I'm not known for flattery. I agree with the 'just do your job' viewpoint. But I have to admit, we were a bit flummoxed before you arrived."

"You only had three, now four, victims. We had five. Why do you think Ferguson moved here? There are a lot more Royal Highlander veterans in Scotland than in London or Manchester."

"I don't know. Working his way north? Somebody in particular he's after? You'd think after two or three, someone among those veterans would have added two plus two and gotten Robert Ferguson before Angus and the other two veterans did. Of course, Angus said they were talking among themselves. They should have talked to the Yard."

"Some of those I interviewed were thinking along those lines, but they were wondering if it wasn't someone who served. PTSD and all that. One even mentioned ISIS sympathizers. Like I said, it's a strange world, and a deadly one at times."

"They're also proud soldiers, Katherine. They're not likely to scare easily, and they might have been thinking about handling it among themselves. Angus couldn't do that, of course."

## Chapter Four

Sanborn didn't know if she and Heath had charmed Police Scotland's coppers, but those at Glasgow's main station pointed her to a recruitment office, and the Army clerk there found records for Robert Ferguson.

"Last address here is for Maureen MacDonald. Says she's a relative, so I guess he was living there?"

Maureen opened the door, examined their warrant cards, and led them into a very pink-and-black sitting room. She was Robert's spinster aunt.

"My nephew was orphaned. Why are you looking for him?"

"He's a person of interest to both the Yard in London and Manchester PD."

"Um. I haven't seen him in a while." She sighed. "I suppose that means he's in trouble?"

"It might," Sanborn said. "We'd like to get some background on him if you don't know his whereabouts."

"Background's easy. He left here after washing out of the Highlanders. Wanted to get away, he did. Always a troubled lad, he was."

"So, let's have some more of that background."

"Not a problem. I did my best. Took him in. His parents left him a small trust I could draw on, so I sent him to a private school. I'm not the mothering type, and I thought he'd acquire some companions there and socialize a bit too. Never seemed to fit in, although he showed some spark in sports. Proved himself there. Always trying to prove himself, he was, but never managed to do so in his studies. So, he decided to enlist. That meant he could choose his outfit, at least back then. Don't know if that's true now. But where are my manners, ladies? Let me make some tea for us."

While she was busy in the kitchen, Heath sorted her notes and Sanborn walked around the sitting room, studying family pictures and the like. One showed a young Ferguson, still recognizable, standing between a man and woman, probably his parents.

"Did you mention the Archer?" Ames asked at this point in Sanborn's oral report.

"The aunt couldn't believe that he was capable of murder. I pointed out that trying to enlist meant he probably thought he was."

"Battlefield killing is hardly murder," Ames said.

"Call it what you want, but soldiers are trained to kill."

"Okay, we'll have to agree to disagree. Anything indicating why a bow and arrows were later chosen?"

"She only mentioned sports, but he was into archery. There were three trophies tucked back away on a top shelf of the sitting room's cabinet next to the chimney. I'm tall enough so I could take a peek. Three years in a row, he was top archer in a local contest in the area. He was representing his school. I called the school when Heath and I returned to our hotel. He was an expert archer. As enthusiastic as any young lad might be for sports, to the detriment of his studies."

Ames breathed out. "His weapon of choice to use to strike back at the regiment. We have to get this scrote before he kills again, to protect Angus and the others."

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Now that Robert Ferguson was their prime suspect, Ames and Sanborn set up an all-out manhunt in the Manchester area and, to a lesser extent, in the rest of the country, including the London area and Scotland. They also informed all major ports to be on the lookout for the serial killer, thinking he might try to leave the country. Most of the constables manned the phones because the media had published the super's plea for help; that story appeared on BBC One and other major news outlets.

"Every Joan and Joe Smythe are spotting the bloke," DS Battle complained to the two DIs. They were in Ames's office pouring over transportation records, including recent hire-car rentals. "We'd better find this yob soon, or everyone's going to collapse from exhaustion," Battle told them.

"Take a chair, sergeant. Let's have a chinwag," Ames said.



"About what? I've got things to do. You two have things to do." He still sat down and sighed.

"As a bit of R and R," said Ames, "let's try to channel Ferguson. If you were him, who'd be your next victim?"

Battle shrugged. "I've got nothing. Some Highlander, of course. You go first."

"Katherine?"

"I'm not too creative when I try to relax, Nathan. I use mental mantras. I'll listen but not too closely."

Ames frowned, but he knew everyone was knackered. "Okay. I'll go first, and I'll do so by asking a question, so listen: Do we know who signed off on Ferguson's discharge? Or who was responsible for the negative reports?"

Sanborn perked up. "We don't, but I can call Scotland and find that out. Give me that damn phone!"

## Chapter Five

They split up. Sanborn and Heath took the first Highlander on the list of drill instructors who'd made a negative report, the only one in Manchester; Ames and Battle took the man who signed off on the discharge who lived just outside the city.

Ames and Battle found Edward Kerr, now a retired Colonel, pruning his roses in the front of his house that was in a small village between the motorway and Stretford. They parked and approached the old man.

He studied their warrant cards. He was dressed in a heavy shirt, khakis, and wellies, yet still looking like he was in uniform and expecting them to salute. He returned the cards and flashed them a thin smile.

"You plods sure seemed to be in a hurry. What's going on?"

"Do you remember a man named Robert Ferguson, Colonel?" Ames said to the straight-backed old man.

He pushed back his hat, revealing a shock of white hair. He turned a weathered face to the sky. "Looks like rain's coming, I dare say." He then turned to them again. "Ferguson? Name doesn't register, Inspector. Should I know him?"

"He was a recruit who washed out of the Highlanders."

"Um, if you say so. Can't say I remember him. A lot of bonnie laddies don't make the cut. We're an elite group. Can you tell me why you're looking for him?"

"Have you heard of the Archer?"

He looked at the sky again. "You mean the constellation? What's that got to do with anything. I'm not into astrology. My dear wife was, little good it did her. The big C got her, and that's a constellation too."

"No, this Archer's been in the news. He's a person of interest in our investigation."

"Um, I got out of the habit of watching news with that pandemic. All bad, that was. When I go into the village, I sometimes purchase the *Times*. And sometimes my housekeeper leaves her copy for me. She comes three times a week. Couldn't do without her. I keep myself to myself now, lads, trying to enjoy my golden years, ken?"

Ames smiled. "This Archer is a serial killer. We think he's Robert Ferguson."

"Like I said, I don't—"

Battle, who'd been distracted by the interesting scenery around the little cottage, suddenly pushed Kerr down into the flowerbed. An arrow zinged past. Ames hit the ground too.

"Was-was that an arrow?" weakly sputtered the Colonel, who'd had the wind knocked out of him.

"Can you make it inside, sir?" Ames said.

Kerr took a deep breath. "Just watch me, laddies."

He jumped up and, in a running crouch, made it inside the house just as another arrow sought him out.

"Shooter's on that berm across the street to our right of the tree, Guv," Battle said.

"Figured as much. The height helps him. Tree gives him shadow You go left and hit low; I'll go right and hit high."

They split, mimicking the old veteran's running crouch.

As Ames circled, he spotted Ferguson, who was notching another arrow. Ames also spotted Battle, who had greater ground to cover to reach the Archer. Ames waited long enough so that they hit Ferguson at the same time. He was so surprised he didn't have a chance to aim at either one of them. The bow and arrows were scattered. Battle put the handcuffs on.

As they walked the serial killer, kicking and squirming, down the berm to their car, Colonel Kerr exited the house with a shotgun.

"That's not necessary, sir," Ames called out.

"Good, because I might have forgotten to load it." He laughed nervously. "So...this is the Archer. Who is he again?"

"He was a recruit for your regiment. You signed his discharge papers when he didn't pass the grade."

"Bastard!" exploded the handcuffed man, his ire directed at the Highlander.

"Good thing I mustered you out, Mr. Archer," Kerr said, coming close and glaring at Ferguson. "You'd have been a disgrace to our regiment, I'm sure."

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"I guess collaboration can work sometimes, Katherine," Ames said to Sanborn as they waited on the platform for her train to London. "Thanks for all your help."

"We already went through all that, Nathan. We closed the case here as well as ours in London. I hope the Crown Court isn't lenient with Mr. Ferguson."

"I doubt they will be. I'd bet on a life in prison without chance of parole. If the Yard ever needs our help, let me know."

She smiled. "Back at you."

She leaned into him and kissed him on the cheek. "For a Londoner, you're not half bad."

"And for a Mancunian ex-pat who hates football, you're not either. It's a strange world."

"Indeed it is. Ah, here's my damn train."

He towed her suitcase to the entrance to the train car and handed it up to the conductor. He was already walking to his car when she looked out from the window, regret on her face.

## **Computer Games**

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#### **Preface**

While the main character here is Scottish, this is *not* a British-style mystery. It takes place in New York City and mostly involves that city's FBI field office. But FBI agents are, in a sense, federal cops, like Britain's MI5 or NCA, so they often do detective work. The case considered here has a bit of spy-story flavor, so it sets the tone for the MI6 story that follows.

#### **Chapter One**

Angus MacGregor always made the most of his lunch hour. He'd buy a pita sandwich—variety came from what he asked the deli to put inside—and a bottle of water, and then enjoy it and the time he had to think of most anything besides work-related challenges. That was done inside the deli on bad-weather days, but on good-weather ones, he'd go straight from the deli to a bench in the little plaza in front of his office building.

The teeming NYC lunch-hour crowds on good or bad days didn't interfere with his introspective thoughts, and that fateful day was no exception. He sat on his bench enjoying the warm sun and remembering a pleasant trip to Aberdeen the summer before college. His small group of school chums, all computer geeks like him, lads and lasses alike, had all chattered on about what their futures might bring. It was a happier time in many ways. In the evening, they'd used their fake ID cards to go pub hopping, all of them chatting up the publicans and clients, most of whom were at least ten years older and amused by their antics, especially some old birds who'd flirted with Angus and his male companions.

As he took his last bite of his sandwich, a strange concoction of cucumbers, cheese, and bacon, its wrapper fell to the ground. He was eco-conscientious, so he twisted sideways to his right and reached for the wrapper.

Something slammed into his left shoulder, pushing him off the bench. The bright, sun-filled square suddenly turned black.

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Less than an hour after the shooting, FBI Special Agent Krissy Dunn watched the video replay on the wide screen with her fellow agents. The wide-angle camera offered an excellent view of the shooting: Fourteen people had immediately died; there were three survivors, one of them critically wounded and struggling for her life.

"Terrorism, of course," said the Deputy Director of the FBI's NYC field office. "But what kind? Foreign? Domestic?" Phil Jackson looked around the small group of agents.

"Or just another psycho sniper," Sam Kelly said.

"Yeah, that's another possibility, like that Las Vegas incident. Okay, people, we have lots of work to do. Sam, we need a liaison with the anti-terrorism unit. We need them involved, if they aren't already, especially NYPD, to do some canvassing. Focus on the terrorism aspect, of

course, to get them moving. Bob, you've got the lead with all the forensics people. Some sniper used one of those skyscrapers facing that little park to create a massacre. Krissy, let's find out who the victims are, dead or alive. If they were just random targets like in Las Vegas, I want to know that."

"I'd like to study the video again. It seemed like sandwich-wrapper man was the first one shot, but he was also the victim farthest away compared to the other victims. That seems strange."

Jackson thought a moment and then nodded. "Good catch. Are you thinking he was the real target?"

"I don't know what to think. But I want a timeline before I start my task, as well as knowing who the victims are and who survived."

"I believe sandwich-wrapper man was a survivor, but I hear you. Okay, people, let's get movin'. Keep me posted."

"Who's handling the media?" Sam said.

"The Director, of course. Liaison with the Mayor's office too. The shit jobs. That's why he gets paid the big bucks."

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Krissy met Angus MacGregor in his hospital room. She watched a nurse help him get into a long-sleeved tee. Although he was young and had a good body build—*gym workouts after work maybe?*—it was fortunately too large for him.

The critically injured woman had died. The other survivor had already gone home to Brooklyn, and Krissy had made an appointment to interview her. As the third survivor struggled into a shirt that clearly wasn't his, he would be her first interviewee.

"You another copper?" he said.

She flashed her badge. "Kristine Dunn, FBI. Are you up to a few questions, Mr. MacGregor?"

"If you get me out of here and treat me to a cup of coffee. The brews in my favorite deli are bound to be better than anything in this hospital."

"The deli where you bought the pita sandwich?"

He nodded and smiled. She liked the smile.

"I should have realized your people would know by now what I even had for breakfast." He sighed. "They tell me the Met, MI5, and NCA are worse."

"We have a lot of CCTV security cameras here too, but not as many as UK cities. That sandwich wrapper probably saved your life."

Angus thought a moment. "Because I reached down to pick it up? Saving the environment saved me."

"Exactly. You were the first person shot. Any idea why that was?"

Again, there was hesitation. "Not a clue. Isn't it your job to find that out?" He saw that the nurse was waiting with papers for him to sign. "Give me a moment, and then we'll be able to have a good chinwag over some excellent coffee. I have all day, Agent Dunn. I took the rest of the day off, what's left of it."

## Chapter Two

Krissy let Angus buy her coffee while she organized her thoughts on how to handle the interview. The deli was quiet now. Even the rubbernecks had dispersed when they saw that the authorities had declared the whole area a crime scene. NYPD had left access to some of the local businesses, though, probably thinking agents, cops, and forensics specialists would still need sustenance as they processed everything.

"Plain coffee," Angus said, putting her cup in front of her. "Pure Colombian. You drink yours like I do."

She blew a bit on the hot liquid and eyed him over the cup's brim. "Are you from Scotland?"

"Guilty as charged. Proud green card holder with an indefinite visa, unless I become a citizen. ICE doesn't bother me. Of course, I'm not black or brown either. My company has offices in Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Paris, and here in New York City. I've been here five years."

"Do you like it?"

"London, New York, Paris—all big cities that can be hard to take at times. Dangerous too. All have suffered terrorist attacks."

"What kind of work do you do?"

He smiled. "Esoteric computer shite. The kind Silicon Valley specializes in."

"Silicon Valley specializes in a lot of high-tech things. And not just Silicon Valley. Computer coding?"

"That's a broad description. I earned my stripes creating new computer games."

"And now?"

"Still computer games, in a sense."

"Can you be more specific?"

"No. Not even if you have a warrant."

"Why not?"

"Um, let's just say we're worried about corporate espionage. There's big money in computer games. I'm sorry, but if you want to know more about my work, you'll need to talk with my bosses."

"I'll do that. I assume they'd pay attention to a request from the FBI's Director in DC?"

"Maybe not. But let's not waste time debating that. Am I somehow suspected of something because I survived?"

"No, it's more the case of why you were shot at first. Do you have any enemies, Mr. MacGregor?"

He shrugged. "No one I can give a name to. Maybe some people back home. Students, professors, old girlfriends—who knows? Here I'm basically a recluse who just does his job, really a boring bloke, to be honest."

"You realize we can check you out with all those organizations you mentioned? The Yard, MI5, NCA, maybe Police Scotland."

"You forgot MI6. Maybe I'm a Russian spy." He smiled.

"This isn't a joke, Mr. MacGregor. A lot of people were killed."

"I know. Sorry. I do want to help." He took a sip of coffee. "Aah, heavenly elixir. You're cute when you get angry, you know."

She stood and slid her card across to him. "I have to help check the backgrounds of all the other victims, survivors or not. I'll get back to yours soon. No tech company stonewalls me, Mr. MacGregor."

"You can call me Angus."  
"And you can call me persistent."

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Krissy soon learned a bit about why Angus MacGregor had been so circumspect about what he did for a living. She was working late on her report about the day's activities when Nicholas Brady was ushered into the NYC FBI HQ's open-plan area where her desk sat.

"What's he doing here?" she said to her colleague.

"Visitor from DC, Krissy. Not much I could do. You need to talk to him."

She eyed her visitor. He could have been one of Cinderella's mice, more like a rat, before he changed into a coachman. Impeccably dressed in a three-piece, he looked like officialdom.

"Hello, Agent Dunn," he said, offering a handshake. "I'm hear to speak with you about Angus MacGregor."

"Sit down. You've obviously convinced my colleague, but do you have some ID?"

"Of course." He handed her a shield that was somewhat similar to her own.

She studied it and then said, "Does Mr. MacGregor work for the Pentagon?"

"I can't answer that here. I'd like to make an appointment with you to visit me at Mr. MacGregor's workplace tomorrow morning."

"That's a waste of my time unless he's there and ready to answer questions."

"Oh, he'll be there."

"Why don't you just tell me whether his work has anything to do with our terrorist event?"

"I'm expecting you or your colleagues to determine that, but you obviously need more information to do it. I've already perused your security clearance records, so we can talk after you sign a few papers."

"You realize you're already basically telling me that what Mr. MacGregor does might have made him a target. don't you?"

"Can't be helped. The only other option is that I take over the investigation of the shooting, but that's not a good idea. What Angus does might not have anything to do with the shooting, so I'd just have to bring the FBI, NYPD, and so forth back into the investigation. I think multitasking would be much more efficient, with you as liaison between the local effort here and ours at the Pentagon. Can I count on your visit? Say 9 a.m.? You have Mr. MacGregor's business card. Someone will take you to us."

"I need to check that this is okay with the Deputy Director."

"It is. My boss spoke to your bosses, the one in DC as well as the one here."

"And who is your boss?"

He smiled. "I bet you're very good in an interrogation, Special Agent Dunn. See you tomorrow."

He made his way out like he knew where he was going.

\*\*\*

Krissy didn't sleep well. She was worried about what Angus MacGregor was involved in. Jackson was okay with her postponing the interview with the other survivor and assigned some other agents to help her determine the backgrounds of all the victims save Angus.

She couldn't think of anyone from Angus's past wanting to kill the Scotsman. If he had been the target—that was still in doubt—it must be for the work he was doing for the Pentagon. No one could find anything in what was available to the public about what that secret work might be, but that wasn't surprising.

Angus seemed like other nerds she knew—shy, introverted, and intelligent—but he also had a good personality, especially considering she'd interviewed him at an awkward time. She'd realized he was analyzing her as much as she was him. Those blue eyes had seemed hypnotic.

He'd said she was cute when mad. She thought he was just cute. She'd have to be careful. Agents had to maintain their distance and be neutral where the public was concerned. She hoped she could do that, at least until the case was over.

\*\*\*

Brady met Krissy at the elevator exit to the floor where Angus worked. "Mr. MacGregor awaits us in the SCIF."

*SCIF?* She knew the acronym's meaning, "Special Compartmented Information Facility," but she frowned. *What's that doing here in a company that creates computer games?*

She nodded but said nothing and followed the little gnome through a maze of cubicles filled with hackers mesmerized by their computer screens until he stopped in front of a gray steel door. He knocked: three times-pause-once-pause-and then four times.

*Pi. A simple code*, she thought. Of course, the green light above the keypad/thumbprint sensor meant that someone was already inside the SCIF.

Brady looked at her and smiled, his enlarged upper incisors with the gap between them reinforcing her rodent analogy. "They don't even allow me to have the code, Agent Dunn, and my thumbprint won't work either. Of course, if either did, we'd have to fine the company for a security violation."

*Of course.* She stared at the ceiling tiles. *Good Lord! What am I getting into?*

Angus opened the door. "Welcome, Agent Dunn. Nicholas. Please come inside my bat cave."

Inside she found just an ordinary executive office that had been turned into a gamer's dream palace. It had a computer center all its own because the entire wall in back of MacGregor's desk was filled with servers. A huge printer sat in one corner atop a large file cabinet with its own keypad combination. In front of the desk sat a coffee table with four fancy leather chairs.

Angus gestured toward the table after taking his arm out of the sling. "Let's all take a seat. I'm very busy, and so are you two, so it's better to avoid wasting time."

Krissy and Brady took seats, and Angus, after picking up a thin, red file folder from the top of his desk, joined them. She saw the folder was marked "Top Secret—NOFORN."

"Your show," Angus said to Brady, handing him the folder and then putting the arm back into the sling. "Damn nuisance," he said with a smile, "and I'll have to get the wound checked again."

"Yes, well, um, Agent Dunn, I have the dubious honor of being the security person in charge of swearing you into our little program here. The special program 'Confidential' clearance you'll receive is to be considered an addendum to your general clearance as an FBI agent. Is that understood?"

She thought a moment. The room was hot, so she removed her jacket. No wonder MacGregor was in a muscle shirt, Bermudas, and sandals. The gnome in his three-piece suit wasn't perspiring, though. *Maybe not a rat but a snake who likes the warmth?*

She waved a hand to indicate the room and its contents. "Is introducing me to all this secrecy really necessary? I only want to know if Mr. MacGregor was a target."

"Which is precisely what we want to know," Brady said with a sly smile. Angus nodded. "Very few people know about this little program. You will have to agree to become a member of our select group, I'm afraid, with all the responsibilities that implies, so you can find out."

"I conclude, being privy to information I don't have, you think that will help me determine whether Angus was a target."

He shrugged. "More or less. Or our program, because he's a bit indispensable, you see. At the moment, he has no backup. We consider it necessary intel for you to have for your investigation into the shooting. We certainly don't want to hinder that, and that opinion goes all the way to the top."

Krissy wondered what "all the way to the top" meant but only smiled. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"The first order of business is your signature." He opened the folder and took out three sheets of paper. "This part is rather simple. Read one sheet—the others are just copies—and then sign all three copies." He jerked a thumb to indicate the filing cabinet. "One copy will remain on file here, and the two others...hmm, let's just say elsewhere."

"No spells casted upon you or other magical mumbo-jumbo," Angus said with a smile.

Brady glared at Angus, who shrugged, and then returned his attention to Krissy. "After you sign, Mr. MacGregor and I will do our best to explain in the time remaining the purpose to this special program. I have to catch a plane back to DC."

\*\*\*

The project was called "Patriot Games." Krissy remembered that long ago she'd read a Tom Clancy novel with that title. She wondered if the project name had been Angus MacGregor's, though. She was a guest at a computer games firm, after all, and he was from the UK.

The name was also appropriate: The idea was to develop malware disguised as computer games to bring down any adversary's computer network when hostilities with that adversary were imminent or ongoing. Although the idea was motivated by what the Russians had done in every election since 2016, and what other adversaries like China and Russia were now still trying, attacking companies, service facilities, financial organizations, and so forth, the malware went far beyond their efforts, making those other efforts seem rather primitive. AI coding, Angus's specialty for writing gaming code, played an important role. The code would learn from attempts to thwart it and become even more deadly to any enemy's computer system it invaded and infected.

At the end of the allotted hour for her appointment, Krissy was shown out of the building by Brady. Her head was spinning. She had an appointment in Brooklyn but took the time to get a latté in Angus's favorite deli. She figured she'd burned a lot of calories just from the mental effort of trying to understand what the program involved.

As she sipped her latté and munched on her scone, she still had no clue if what Angus did for a living had made him a target, but she knew that if any adversary had any inkling that the



program existed and depended so much on the Scottish immigrant, they wouldn't think twice about killing the young computer genius.

But was Angus irreplaceable? Wouldn't the Pentagon just give his job to another hacker? Sure, training would take time, but maybe they didn't have that time? The company obviously had many employees who were computer nerds. What was so special about MacGregor?

She was still mulling over those questions when she knocked on the door of the other survivor's apartment.

### Chapter Three

Becky Prince was a young accountant, a short, bubbly, but nervous sort who blushed a lot. She did that when Krissy mentioned Angus MacGregor.

"Isn't he a hunk? I always looked forward to eating with him. I'd like to eat him, of course, but, um, you know, he rarely smiled at me. Oh, what a smile, though. I found out he's Scottish. I wonder if he wore kilts back home. You know, the true Scots wear no underpants with them. I bet he has quite the package!"

She babbled on a bit more, a bit less graphically. When she took a breath, Krissy managed a question. "So, you admired him from afar. I have an idea why he escaped, but why did you?"

She stood and ran her hands along her sides and then patted her tush. "I'm five feet and that only in high heels, and I have butt-fat. I bent over to pick up a dime. I guess I should be Scottish, right? You know the joke about the regiment's condom, right? You didn't notice I reached for the dime in the video?"

Krissy understood Becky's point. She'd have made a very small target even if she hadn't gone for the dime. Somehow the latter wasn't on the video record, but she'd been a lot closer to the other victims than Angus. To get the wide view, cameras could lose the short. The sniper was interested in killing the max number of people, especially if he had been truly after Angus and wanted to distract from that. It was evidence for his skills that he had shot nearly everyone in the plaza.

"Let me confirm something: Would you say that the other survivor made a habit of eating lunch in that little park?"

"Um, I'd say so. In good weather, of course. I've been watching him do it for more than two years."

*Some would call that stalking*, Krissy thought. She figured any attack Becky might launch against Angus wouldn't be a lethal one, though. "Tell me about your job."

"My company has many business accounts. That's often contracted out these days—the tax codes are so complicated—so we're always in demand. Our offices are in the building next to Angus's."

That trend continued during the rest of their conversation: Becky Prince's working days were all relative to Angus's. The poor girl was infatuated but had never had the courage even to speak to Angus. And he probably never realized he had a secret admirer!

She wrote Becky's escape off as a quirk of fate or a difficult shot and returned to HQ.

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Jackson met Krissy when she returned from Brooklyn. "Anything useful from interviewing Prince or MacGregor?"

"Prince had a convincing story about why the sniper failed to kill her. No further action needed. She's too airheaded to realize how close she came to dying, MacGregor, on the other hand, could very well have been the target."

"Something weird there. Our boss got two calls from DC. On the second, he was told to make sure you were the only one from here to question MacGregor, a message I'm supposed to pass on to you. A little late, but mission completed. What's going on, Krissy?"

"Like I said, there are reasons for his being the principal target, the others only a distraction. If all the other victims seem random, I'm going with that. That's what I'm pursuing. To exclude the other victims, I need to do a lot of computer work first and then contact their friends and relatives."

"I can get you some help for that soon. Interviews have secondary priority in those cases if we have another line of investigation."

"You've got it. We should also be looking for any connections beyond their working in the same area. Prince and MacGregor had an interesting one-sided connection, for example. She was his secret lunchtime admirer."

Jackson laughed but then frowned. "This *could* turn out to be just another Las Vegas, the tragic case of some psycho mad at the world."

"With one important distinction: They caught the Las Vegas sniper."

Jackson nodded. "Two strikes against us: We have no shooter, and we have no motive."

"Hopefully we can resolve the first problem, and that will solve the second. Let me log on to my computer, Phil."

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Nearly two hours later, Jackson approached Krissy at her desk. "I hate to interrupt, but I need you to liaison with one of our forensic teams. Jerry and friends have located where the shots came from by using trajectory analysis."

"Are they there?"

"No, you'll be going there with them. I want you to determine if there's some reason MacGregor was the first target. Analyze the order of the shots from the viewpoint of the sniper in general. Get in his head. Did he have a plan? Et cetera, et cetera."

"Okay. I was getting bored with what I was doing. So far, the other victims seem to be just innocents who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time by eating lunch in that same park, as they would probably often do, given a nice day. Who'd ever guess that bullets would rain down upon them?"

"What you're doing still has to be done, but we're spread thin. You've met MacGregor. Did he go after him in particular?"

"So, where's Jerry's team?"

"Waiting for you in the van. Our parking garage."

"Oh joy. That van could be an old, dirty hippy's."

"My father was a hippy. Marched right past the White House giving Nixon the finger."

"My father was too. Your father was lucky. Mine got drafted. Back then they didn't call it PTSD. He protested against the war when he returned."

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Jerry Simpson was a small, black agent with a big, toothy smile—a lot more pleasant smile than Angus's security gnome Brady. He helped her into the van to join the team members. Everyone was dressed in their FBI jackets, including Krissy. She thought that made them into easy targets, but the chance the sniper was still hanging around was slim.

"Where are we going?" Jerry gave her the address. "That's where Becky Prince, one of the survivors, works, along with about half the victims. Makes me wonder if this was revenge for some ex-worker's perceived workplace slights."

"Or current ones. A good shooter, whoever the perp is."

That gave Krissy another idea: Was the sniper ex-military? And why hadn't Jackson already thought of that? Or maybe he had and was investigating that angle himself? He was ex-military and had connections in the Pentagon, less with VIPs than with worker-bees, old buddies who'd made a career out of military service.

"You okay?" Jerry said, helping her out of the van when they arrived.

"Just mulling over some things about the case." She eyed the building. "Are we going to the top floor?"

"Could be either of the top two or the roof. We'll work our way up from the lower possibility."

Security guards accompanied them, more out of curiosity than necessity. The lowest floor in question still contained offices, but there was a storage room opposite the elevators that could have served as a sniper's nest. Its window had been bricked over, though, the mortar old and undisturbed. The storeroom on the floor above it was a twin except that its small window, while closed, was still functional. Its sill was dust free, and a partial footprint was visible on the dirty floor.

"That sill was wiped down," Jerry told Krissy, who'd been questioning the guards about building security. She was dressed like the CSU members, making it appear the guards were conversing with an astronaut. "We still might get some prints if we're lucky."

"I want to take a look from that window. It's not ideal because it's small. I also want to see what the sniper would have seen."

"Okay, but even a six-foot guy would need something to stand on. Maybe the roof was the site used?"

"Lots of wind up there," said one of the guards. "Cooling towers, cables, you name it. Not a place that's easy to get to or negotiate. We take a walk up there at least once a week, though."

"If the sniper knew that schedule, that walk wouldn't accomplish much." She returned her attention back to Jerry, pointing a gloved hand at a wooden crate in the storeroom's far corner. "Could the sniper have used that?"

"Um, maybe, depending on what it contains. Let me check." He went over and easily picked up the crate. "Whoa! Cig butt. Maybe we have DNA? Probably stuck to the bottom of the crate. Hopefully was careless about policing the area. Let us finish processing the entire room. It will only take a sec."

To complete their analysis of method, after the team finished processing the rest of the room, Krissy was able to move the crate to the window and peer out.

She spotted the bench where MacGregor had sat and where other victims had been sitting, standing, or walking, by using her tablet to compare. The distance between the suspected sniper's nest and where Angus had sat clearly indicated that the shooter had a lot of experience.

Wind always blew up and down the Manhattan canyons. At that distance, the shooter would have had to correct for it and hope there'd be no random gust. She eyed the flag flapping in the wind above the deli's building. That flag might help, but the sniper would need a lot of skill in order to make a kill shot.

She also noticed that where Becky Prince had sat made her a much easier target. If the sniper had killed so many, at almost killed Angus, how could he not have killed Prince?

She got down from the crate and approached the guards. "I want to talk to all of you who were on duty just before the shooting began. The sniper used this window, but how did he get here? He might have had inside help."

"Not from us."

She understood the defensive attitude. "Anyone in the building might have helped. The sniper could have pretended to be a building inspector, for example."

"We already gave all the records to the NYPD and FBI."

"Good. I'd like to review them *in situ*." She saw the blank faces. "Here. And your CCTV records. We need to know who this shooter was."

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The building's security chief, a pleasant, older fellow named Scott Olson, had welcomed Krissy into his inner sanctum where the two of them went through internal video records after coming up with nothing from a review of the visitors' log. The building's offices contained lawyers, financial advisors, ad agencies, a literary rights agency, and a plastic surgeon. It was impossible to note anything unusual out of the many workers and visitors in that list of names, which even included a Sally Field and Tom Sellick—not the real ones, of course, as determined from the video records.

Krissy spotted the tall, thin man dressed in a uniform and carrying a long toolbox, though, as another video record began.

"Some kind of repairman?" she said. "Do we know who he is?"

"They're supposed to register as well. He has a plumber's snake draped over one shoulder. Maybe some floor had a plumbing problem?"

"There's no plumber in the entry log. And most everyone indicates either who they're seeing or who they represent."

"Um, could be your guy. I don't see a sniper's rifle, though."

Krissy did a quick calculation. "It could be a special breakdown piece that fits into that toolbox. Let's see which floor he goes to."

The video continued, the lights above the elevator's entrance indicating the floors visited one by one. "Stopped at the top floor. Where that storeroom is."

"Go forward to after when the shooting ends." They soon saw the same plumber exit the elevator on the ground floor and rapidly head for the front door, walking right past the reception area manned by two security guards. "Pretty brazen. He's definitely our guy. With that hat pulled so low and the high collar on his shirt, it's hard to see his face. Let's go through all the video with him in it again to see if we can get a good facial."

They were soon rubbing their eyes from the strain of going over and over the grainy video. Krissy started to look for other details. She spotted a distinctive ring and a mole on the same hand.

"I can get a close up of that."

"Not too close. The pixelation will kill us."

"He might have stolen that uniform," Olson suggested. "If the company's legit, there might be video there too."

"Good idea. I think that's all we're getting now unless the DNA traces from the cigarette lead to a match."

"Unlikely."

She nodded. "Whatever. Thanks, Scott." She blew him a kiss. "I need to return to the office ASAP. Maybe we can pick up that plumber on the outside CCTV."

She dashed from the tiny, hot room filled with video screens.

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"An SUV picked him up four blocks north," Sam said. "And we've got the plate."

"Let's see who owns that SUV," Phil said.

The plate was NY state's. The SUV belonged to a doctor who lived on Staten Island. He'd reported the SUV stolen three days earlier.

"Dead end," said Jackson.

"Maybe not," Sam said. "I have the driver's face in the sideview mirror."

"Hit that with facial recognition software."

"While you were following the SUV," Krissy said, "I think I traced the ring. At least I have a good match to a Suffolk County technical high school's 1994 graduation ring."

"Do they teach plumbing there?" Sam said.

Everyone laughed, even Krissy, who thought it was a bad joke.

"I'm going to take a stab and say we might want to see what grads from that school were snipers in the military, Army or Marines."

"Could be one of ours or NYPD's," Jackson said. "SWAT."

"Who might have continued to use his skills after leaving the military," Krissy said.

"Okay. Let's get cracking on those three possibilities. Local high school grads trained as snipers. Or anyone else who matches all our meager evidence."

Krissy agreed with Jackson's analysis. They didn't have much evidence. She even thought the cig butt was probably a janitor's who'd probably used the storerooms late at night when everyone in the building had gone home.

They were dealing with a professional, a sniper who knew what he was doing. Was he a foreign assassin assigned to kill Angus? How did he or his handlers even find out about the program that involved Angus? Was Nicholas Brady working to answer exactly those questions? If he was, he wasn't sharing any information with her!

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With four people working on the problem and Jackson motivating everyone, they came up with a list of eleven grads from the class of 1994 who had joined the Army or Marines. Three had specialized in communications, two as chopper pilots, two as medics, and one became a Marine cop, an MOS 5811 aka "Military Occupational Specialty." That left three who could have been ordinary grunts later specializing as snipers.

"I guess snipers don't have a special designation?" Krissy said.

"Maybe not officially," said Jackson, "and they're probably selected from those who have the best marksman ratings in basic training."

"How are we going to find that out?" said Sam.

"Not easily," another one from the group said. "It would be more efficient if we search for the three and interrogate them. Are any still living in the area?"

"Good question," Jackson said. "Let's find out. Man the computers, full speed ahead. But Sam, take a look at that master-of-arms too. He could be good with a gun."

"She," Krissy said. "Linda Finley. She's NYPD. That probably excludes her?"

"Not if she's in a SWAT team," Sam said.

Jackson snapped his fingers. "Okay, Sam, trade places with Krissy. Krissy, you and I are going to talk with NYPD. Follow me."

She followed Jackson into his small office. "Why the secrecy? And why me?"

"I'll be the observer if you can talk to this Finley. Woman to woman. You know."

"Meaning you think she'll relate to me better than you because you're a sexist prick?"

"I wouldn't put it that harshly, but yes. Women talk to women better."

"Oh, please. Just call whoever might know her at NYPD and let's see what happens."

Jackson got through to someone in the police commissioner's office with access to personnel records. She gave out some information on Finley and texted the bio from her service record to Jackson. He read through it and then handed the smart phone to Krissy.

Finley had seen combat as a US Marine only on two occasions if one ignored breaking up fights and hauling drunk Marines to the brig. She'd seen more action as an NYPD SWAT team member. Two years earlier, she'd married another cop, Richard Finley. Her maiden name was Linda Prince. Was that just a coincidence?

"Call that NYPD assistant staff back," Krissy told Jackson, "and ask her if this Linda Finley nee Prince is related to Rebecca Prince."

They turned out to be sisters. Becky could be involved in the plot, or her sister just hadn't wanted to kill her!

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Jackson's reaction was swift. "You need to interview MacGregor's stalker again," he told Krissy, "while I try to find and talk to this Linda Finley."

"It's a stretch," Krissy said, "but we need to do it. But you're forgetting the ring. And that plumber was a man."

"We don't know what Richard Finley does. Your Becky mentions something to sister Linda who passes it on to her husband. Where was that ring? On which finger?"

Krissy swallowed after thinking a moment. "On the pinkie of the left hand. You're thinking that Linda gave it to Richard?"

"Possibly a chain of coincidences signifying nothing, but we need to check it out while others are working on the other grads."

"Okay. Can I just call Becky?"

"If you can get her on a screen. I'll try the same with Linda. It's useful to try to read the facial expressions. You can borrow the director's office."

"Where is he?"

"Counterterrorism task force meeting aka schmoozing with the big boys. Go for it."

The NYC FBI Director's office was the largest on that floor of the federal building, of course, but it was just a larger version of Jackson's. She found Becky's number in her phone's call list and dialed it using the director's computer, hoping to connect quickly with Skype or Zoom. But no one answered.

"I'm heading for Becky's office building," she told Jackson on her way out. "She doesn't answer and talking with her can't wait."

"Understood."

She found Becky Prince gossiping with a coworker in the coffee room of her office floor. The coworker took one look at Krissy's serious face and badge and made her escape. Krissy took her seat and managed to change her frown to a smile.

"We'd like to know about your sister and her husband, Becky. Did you ever talk to them about Angus MacGregor?"

She thought a moment. "I don't think so. I don't talk to them much. My sister is always on my case about my not having a boyfriend. She can be downright annoying. She also changed in the Marines, and I don't like Richard at all. I don't like cops in general, no offense intended."

Krissy's smile was now more genuine. "None taken. How much did you know about Angus's work?"

She frowned. "Not a whole lot. I glanced at his laptop a few times in the deli when the weather was bad. Seemed like he was creating games. Made sense. That's where he worked, after all, in a computer game company. I tried once to get on his good side because I saw the games were like Mortal Kombat and so forth. I told him my sister had been overseas and could maybe advise him on how to make his games seem more realistic."

*And you neglected to mention that!* Krissy thought.

"So, he talked to your sister?" Krissy said, thinking this was the connection they needed.

"I have no idea. He didn't seem to pay much attention to my suggestion. I was embarrassed by that. But she could have given him some good ideas, right?"

*You little fool!*

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In the lobby of Becky's building, Krissy called Jackson. "Angus might have talked with Linda at Becky's suggestion."

"What? We can't find either her or her husband! Come back to the office. We need to trace that couple's movements around the time of the shooting. No, I take that back. You're there next to Angus's building. Give him another visit and then get back to me if you confirm he actually talked to the sister...or the husband. He'll certainly remember doing that."

This time there was no security bureaucracy. Krissy just signed in upon joining Angus in the SCIF.

"Good to see you, Agent Dunn. Any news about the shooting?"

"I have a few more questions to ask you. Did you ever talk to Linda Prince about background material for your computer games?"

"Um, yes, I did. At the suggestion of her sister. I was toying around with some of our unclassified products at the deli a few times, developing some ideas for some of our unclassified products. I think she'd been trying to come onto me for a while, but her suggestion was a useful one for our game development. We bury the malware in similar stuff, of course. All the games

have to seem realistic, and the malware must seem like a legitimate new and American computer game. She's with NYPD. So's her husband, Richard Finley. Why are you asking?"

"Did you mention your Pentagon connection?"

He bristled. "Of course not! I might be Scottish, but the UK's part of NATO. I know my duty, and I would never betray my country or the US. How do you think I got my clearance? For God sakes, my grandfather worked on radar in World War II even before MIT did."

Krissy nodded. "Okay, okay, calm down. So, her husband was with her?"

"I had dinner with them."

"Did you take your laptop there?"

"Just my moby. Sorry. Smart phone."

"It was with you at all times?"

"Of course not. I consider that rude. It was in my sports coat's pocket, the coat in their hall closet. At dinner we chatted about some of their experiences overseas. Believe me, the dinner was better than the conversation. That part of the conversation wasn't as enlightening as sister Becky might have assumed, or as I'd hoped for. They're boring people."

"Did you know that Linda is a sniper in an NYPD SWAT team? And Richard might have been a sniper in Afghanistan?"

He blanched. "I thought they were just Marine grunts! Do you think they looked at my smart phone?"

"Do you have anything classified on it?"

"There are some text messages between Nick Brady and me. Completely unclassified."

"Um, not if they found out who he works for."

"How would they even know that?"

"For all you know, he was overseas too. Or they heard his name when they were over there."

He held out his arms. "I'm ready for the handcuffs," he said with a sad face.

She laughed. "Not yet. And I'm not Lollipop."

He blushed. She'd perused a few of the company's wilder X-rated games. Lollipop was a role-playing game featuring an S&M dominatrix who the hero had to convince to tell him where some bad guys were. The X-rating came from the convincing.

## Epilogue

It turned out the Findleys were double agents. They'd been radicalized and sent back to the US to discover weaknesses in the counterterrorism effort in the city. They'd known Brady overseas and traced the security man back to the Pentagon even before the dinner with Angus. Their assignment to kill Angus hadn't come from Al Qaeda, though, They'd met with a man from the Russian Consulate who made the request.

That man would be expelled from the US. The Findleys would spend the rest of their lives in federal prison, Richard for mass murder and his wife for aiding and abetting one.

"You know, don't you, that you have to discover how the Russians found out about our malware project?" Angus said in the SCIF.

Krissy looked at Brady. "Isn't that Nick's problem?"

The skeletal man with the rat's teeth smiled and toasted her. "We'll see. Putin has a lot to deal with right now after Ukraine. We don't want him to become any more psychotic than he



already is. So...we'll see." He patted Angus on the healthy right shoulder. "Right now, you should just go and enjoy your date with Krissy in Little Italy."

"How'd you know about that?" they both said.

"I know everything. Well, most everything."

He smiled and they laughed.

SAMPLE

## The Novice

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#### Preface

Readers who have followed Esther Brookstone's adventures in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series know that her current husband, Bastiann van Coevorden, ex-Interpol agent and MI5 consultant, is her fourth. In those novels, flashbacks and background material refer to the previous ones, as well as to her time in MI6, sandwiched between Graham, husband number one, and Alfred, husband number two. In this sense, this short story is a prequel to all those prequels. (It also became a flashback in one of the Brookstone novels.)

Readers might also remember Jeremy Brand from those novels. This story is also about how the long association between Esther and Jeremy began. She didn't meet Bastiann until much later. The novels are the chronicles of their adventures together, and Jeremy plays a role in most of them.

#### Chapter One

Jeremy Brand didn't know how to handle Esther Brookstone. The young spy was clever, enthusiastic, and productive, but she took too many chances. She was also a stunner who could catch the wandering eye of any Stasi agent looking for a conquest, much to his peril, at least in job standing.

He saw her waiting on a bench reading a newspaper. It would be in German, of course, and printed with dirty ink that would soil those delicate hands with the long fingers of a concert pianist. She spoke the Teuton tongue like a native, even capturing a bit of the East German manner of forming efficiently constructed sentences. Her writing was also educated German prose as if she were an intellectual who supported the East German ruling classes...or was one of their members!

Today she was blond. Her name during this first sojourn into East Berlin was Gretchen Lange. She was nearly as tall as he was, and even dressed in a modest blouse, sweater, skirt, and pumps, was every bit the demure *fraulein*. He took a seat beside her, at the other end of the bench, as if he were a young man trying to approach a young, pretty woman, and being a bit shy about it.

"A dreary day, *fraulein*," he said.

She looked up from her newspaper. "The clouds might come in, I'm afraid."

He resisted the urge to surveil the area. Her statement was a signal that Stasi agents lurked nearby. They'd have to be careful. They always were.

"What news is there today? Good or bad?"

She tapped the paper. "The Kremlin wants us to increase production. It's not clear what that means in the short term."

That was a more complex message, but it meant she had information about Russian visitors to East Germany, yet she wasn't clear that the information was useful.

*How did she get that?* Jeremy asked himself. He didn't want to know.

She handed him the newspaper. "Here. See for yourself. I have an appointment to keep. Please excuse me, *mein Herr*."

He watched her walk away...practiced, dainty steps, not her customary, business-like stride. *Coldly professional, this novice spy.*

He knew he'd find a floppy disk inside the paper. It wouldn't be examined until later, when they'd find the list of Russian visitors on the disk. With luck, they'd also find a list of East German journalists who might be approachable by the British before or after the event.

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The next "meeting" was at a restaurant near various Soviet-style residential towers where Jeremy figured living in a flat there could be dangerous; he knew shoddy construction practices and inferior materials characterized such buildings. They were bleak, foreboding, and gray monuments to Soviet control in the East Germans' worker's paradise.

She was sitting in the booth at the rear; he took the next one.

All meetings between the two were arranged by an intermediary named Walther, a man who lived elsewhere and used an illegal transceiver the British had given him. The messages were generally from Jeremy to Esther via the intermediary, in encrypted Morse code. She could send messages to him too, but that wasn't often because they met on a schedule, both days and times corresponding to agreed upon random numbers in a table the three spies had.

In this case, he'd requested a meeting. She had previously used her charms to approach a young German scientist who secretly made a trip to Moscow and returned. The West had wanted to know the purpose of that visit.

She dropped her contraband issue of a western fashion magazine that anyone could find on sale in kiosks around the city, and he retrieved it for her, without what had been inside. She smiled at him, and he returned to his beer that could never compare to Munich's.

There was a note in German but not in code:

*New system. He's in charge of guidance. Wants asylum. Respond via Walther.*

Jeremy lit a fag and finished the beer, using the lighter to burn the note. After stirring the ashes and putting out the fag—he didn't smoke—he left the restaurant that had just begun to seat dinner guests.

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"That's all she had?" said Jeremy's colleague via Walther from the UK's West Berlin consulate.

Jeremy frowned. *The prat doesn't care about our lives; he just wants useful intel.*

"Asylum effort risky. No way to determine intel is useful," Jeremy said in return.

"Worth the risk. We might have to extract our asset too. She'll need a new hairdo."

Jeremy now smiled. With every deep dive into East Berlin, Esther would require a new identity and a new dye job. For him, it would be a glimpse into what life would be like with a harem, although he knew just one Esther would be enough for him to handle.

"Inform later on extraction reqs. Decision solid about target?"

"Can use him no matter what. Onward."

Jeremy had never set up an extraction, although he'd been at the game longer than Esther. Now he might have two. And, if they extracted the scientist, the Stasi would go after anyone they could find who had had contact with him. Both Esther and the young scientist were in danger.

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Esther Brookstone wasn't a *fraulein*; she was a grieving widow, in fact, although being a British spy passing as a *fraulein* helped dull that widow's grief that was gnawing at her insides. Her beloved Graham was still on her mind, and the thought of joining him wherever he might be, steeled her for whatever dangers awaited her.

She liked Jeremy, her handler. He was a serious bloke—probably deadly serious—but he had an appreciation for the finer things in life as well as the reputation of being a bit of a ladies' man. Graham had been that way too. She was a lady, wasn't she? Of course, Brand couldn't very well pay proper attention to her when they were mostly communicating in code and meeting under the watchful eyes of the Stasi.

Wolfgang came out of the bathroom. "Do you like the look?"

The young scientist had dyed his dark hair and beard blond as she'd insisted.

"Put a towel on, *Herr Doctor* Schmidt. And you forgot to dye all your hair."

He looked down. "Sorry. When will we leave?"

"When Walther gives me the word."

She didn't expect the delay to be long, but the extraction method might be a surprise. She was a novice in everything, trained for anything. She knew the latter only went so far; experience was acquired, not taught.

She was obsessive by nature, and her current obsession resided in a hatred for Soviet-style communism, as practiced by the Soviet Union and all its satellites. She wanted to destroy it. China might be a threat to the world one day, but Russia would always be one simply because the Russian people had never experienced democracy.

She watched the young scientist dress. Yes, young, egotistical, and intelligent enough to realize he'd have a better future in the West. He had no family to leave behind and no serious relationship because he was a bit of a playboy. No matter. The Home Office thought he might be useful, especially if he knew about Russia's new missile guidance systems.

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Jeremy didn't like the plan. The East Berlin train station was out—too many Stasi guards and dogs looking for East Berliners wanting to flee to the West, which was the next Berlin stop. They'd be looking for the scientist, in particular. The Stasi had recently cracked down on lorries carrying goods to and from East Germany, mostly to, for the party VIPs and supposedly returning empty to the West because the workers' paradise produced no goods of interest to the West. So, they'd come up with a different plan.

It was a bit much to ask of a novice spy and the young scientist. So much of the plan depended on luck, and none of them had any experience in extracting personnel. That all increased the risk level, which would be high even in the best of circumstances.

He had to admit there was a personal reason for him to worry. He liked Esther Brookstone, admired her bold attitude towards life, and understood her obsession for doing everything she could to hurt the Soviet regime.

He couldn't let his feelings get in the way of his task, though. No matter his desire to keep her safe, they both had serious jobs to perform, thankless jobs in many ways because Britain's leaders expected their spies to do their duty with no public recognition of their sacrifices.

He couldn't help considering what a relationship with Esther might be like. Maybe that would come later when they passed their batons to others in this strange race for world dominance. No, dominance was the Soviets' goal. Stopping them from achieving it was the UK's.

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The BBC crew climbed into the helicopter. Their job, filming a major news event in East Berlin where East Germany's leaders had wined and dined their Russian visitors, was over. The Russians had wanted the coverage. UK leaders had convinced BBC to give it to them. The Russians had thought it was good propaganda showing how well their satellite countries were coddled and protected, although everyone knew the Kremlin's iron fist squeezed them dry for Mother Russia.

*Blood from stone*, thought the pilot, saluting the BBC lads as he swung into the cockpit. He knew that the ride to the border would be dangerous. Some trigger-happy Stasi might decide to shoot them down. That would create an international incident the Soviet leaders wouldn't like, one exacerbated by the fact that the East Germans had invited the BBC, ordered to do so by the Russians.

"Easy with that equipment!" one BBC photographer called out to the Stasi poking the cargo under the helicopter. "If you break anything, you pay for it!"

The Stasi finally gave their permission to leave, and the helicopter took off, flying fairly low during the short journey. Upon landing in West Germany, the BBC crew was picked up and taken into the small terminal at the heliport. No one in the terminal saw the black van pull alongside the chopper, presumably to load the equipment stashed underneath.

"Can I shed this damn parachute now?" Esther said to Jeremy inside that van. Two agents were helping her out of the duffel bag where she'd been hiding amidst shredded newspapers.

He smiled and nodded. "I'm glad you didn't need it," he said.

The novice was home safe...for the time being.

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The next trip into East Germany, Esther took the train to East Berlin from Frankfurt. It became an East German train at the border. The young *fraulein* was now a brunette with short hair as if she were too poor for a salon cut. When she showed her passport to the East German conductor, it would show she was *Fraulein* Becker, a woman of modest means from a small village who occasionally visited her ailing grandfather in the city.

Jeremy, on the other hand, became a lorry driver delivering luxury goods destined for the Communist party VIPs. He drove it all the way to an East Berlin warehouse from which those goods would be distributed. His trip took longer. Once there, he disappeared into the dawn filtering through the clouds of pollution of the workers' paradise.

The parachutes had been his idea. If the Stasi had shot down the helicopter, he'd wanted Esther to at least have a chance to survive. She'd never used one before; neither had the scientist.

He couldn't help wondering how long the rolls of the dice would continue to be in their favor.

## **The North-Counties Tale**

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#### **Preface**

Readers of the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series also know Esther inherited a castle near Edinburgh in the first novel of that series, *Rembrandt's Angel*. She and her husband have managed to repair it and make it into a comfortable retreat, more for summertime use. In this story, she receives a call from Bastiann to help find some stolen paintings. (This story also became a flashback in a Brookstone novel.)

#### **Prologue**

Klaus knew the owner of the mansion and his family had gone to Antwerp for the holidays, a more muted event for the world's Jews who usually still took the time off. The jeweler had retired, left his business in that Dutch city to his son, and was now visiting with his son's family. The staff at the mansion had gone home for Christmas, leaving it to the holiday frolicking of ghosts from its past.

Klaus figured the old Dutch Jew had a few jewels in the house just west of Morpeth and Newcastle. He'd determined there were never any guards, so he expected a security system and a safe. The security system had been no problem. It took him a bit longer to find the safe.

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

So, he'd explored the first level. He'd been about to descend to the basement when a niggling thought stopped him. Something wasn't right about the study. He went back to take it all in while standing at its entrance. One wall displayed trophies from the daughter's equestrian events; he thought she now lived in Australia. That wall seemed to be wasted space if all it was used for was to display a half dozen second- and third-place finishes in a toff's sport.

He found a switch buried behind some books at the end of the shelf closest to that wall. He threw it, and half the wall moved forward a bit and slid over the other half.

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

The lock mechanism was a modern keypad. It would be easier to open than the traditional combination where he'd have to use a stethoscope. He took the little electronic device from his kit instead and went to work.

#### **Chapter One**

Detective Inspector Harold Gregg watched the SOCOs from the entrance to the study with his sergeant, Tim Shaw. Gregg was frowning; Shaw's expression was neutral. Both had

needed to rise earlier than normal to drive the nearly twenty miles west from Newcastle to the mansion, the largest residence among a few clustered around a small village.

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

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

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

The lead SOCO approached them. "Curious thing about that vault, Guv," he said. "Damn thing is climate-controlled—temperature, humidity, and circulating air are monitored somewhere. We'll find that."

"Maybe via a mobile, so maybe not?" Shaw said.

Like many young coppers, Gregg thought Shaw was addicted to his moby. "Could be a hideaway," he said. "Jews needed some with that madman Hitler. And the way this country's going...."

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

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

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

Gregg spun around to come face-to-face with a tall woman, old and elegant now, even in sweats and trainers, but probably a stunner when young.

"You're the adjuster?"

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

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

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

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

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

Unlike Gregg, Shaw had joined Esther in eating breakfast. But he was listening to the conversation. Gregg only had coffee and toast. He was getting to the age where he had to watch what he ate. Traditional plod food put the pounds on.

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

Shaw glanced at Gregg, whose slight frown caused by the impertinence of the old woman had now turned into a scowl. He was thinking they needed to know a bit more about this energetic wrinklie and her husband. The north counties were a bit provincial, even Newcastle, but the rest of the world did exist.

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

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

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

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

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

"We just closed down a large network that trafficked in stolen art," she told him, "among other naughty mischief, but it's still a worldwide problem. Many buyers wishing to own something only their eyes can see create the market for stolen art. Some less selfish and legitimate owners have to pay ransoms to get their artwork back. With the Covid pandemic, thieves saw it as gainful employment, and that uptick has yet to diminish."

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Later that day, Shaw entered the office.

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

"What did you find on Brookstone?"

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

"Um. None of that's about art."

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

"You're good with her participation then?"

"I guess."

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

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

## Chapter Two

Esther got a hotel room in downtown Newcastle. It wasn't that far a drive down the road to the duke's castle, but there was a chance Freddy March wasn't there, and Esther didn't want to impose on the duchess. Besides, she thought she might be coming and going a lot.

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

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

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

"Guilty as charged. Something about stolen art? What's going on? Another obsession?"

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

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

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

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

Esther nodded. Ambreesh Singh was a techie in MI5 and also a friend of Esther's. "I rather doubt the thief or thieves would risk that, so maybe a list of the usual suspects, representatives of sultans, emirs, and what not who have entered the country."

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

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

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

"And you didn't?"

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

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

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George Langston, who had taken over as head of the Art and Antiques Division from Esther because she'd hated that post, was her Dr. Watson. He had chronicled some of her adventures. What he hadn't been sure about, he made up. Esther thought that was clever of him, but there were some minor if inconsequential errors. Her marrying Bastiann had caught Langston by surprise, though. When she wasn't in London, he and his wife stopped in her gallery now and then to make sure her employees hadn't created any problems. That gallery and Bastiann's consulting, along with their pensions and savings, kept them afloat. Her latest adventures were without pay, of course, but she'd done everything willingly, including the work she was currently doing for Zeke. She thought it was smart of him not to trust a private investigator, which many people would have done, and he had never put much trust in authority with his family history.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Or someone in Dutch security. Or Interpol."

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

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

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

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

She was into dessert and coffee when Jeremy sent a text message containing a list, and George soon followed with another. Both messages said their information was only partial. *It'll keep the old boys at Newcastle PD hopping all the same.* George's was a bit more interesting, but both contained names of jewel thieves in and out of jail. She'd send the locals to Gregg and the foreign ones to Schuster, who hadn't yet responded.

Of more immediate interest was a list of three clandestine auctions with their organizers' names and phone numbers. Of course, the latter wouldn't be registered to anyone, not even the organizers, whose names were probably aliases. She'd been in such auctions. She'd need a fake identity if she attended. She could become Contessa Sartini once again. It had been a while since she used that, and her third husband had indeed been a count, although that title was no longer recognized in Italy. Unfortunately, her and Bastiann's financial situation was no longer at the level it once was. The castle and the gallery had both drained away funds; the second was now turning a profit, but the castle never would. She certainly didn't have enough funds to participate in three auctions, and the one corresponding to Zeke's paintings, if any did, would require her to cover all of Zeke's art. *Maybe he'll go for that?* She'd worry about that later.

She drove her Jaguar back to the hotel and called it an evening.

## Chapter Three

Her mobile's ringtone sounded at six a.m. She cursed but eventually found it in the dark. DI Gregg was on the line.

"I hope this call is important, Inspector. Did you get the lists?"

"I did. I don't want to know where you got that information, and Shaw is taking care of that. Mrs. Brookstone, we have three known jewel thieves we're going to interrogate. Would you like to observe the interrogations? One of them, a Mr. Klaus van Loon, is on one of your lists and says he was trapped in the UK by Brexit, and that we treat immigrants very badly."

"Um. He might have a point there. I have a wonderful handyman working with me in my gallery who's Jamaican and has received some abuse during his stay here in the UK."

"Loon's Dutch. Hardly the same thing. The pandemic is basically over now. He didn't have to stay."

"Where did he used to live in Holland?"

"Antwerp."

She smiled. *Of course. Did he know about Zeke's business before even coming here?*

"I'll be there by seven-thirty."

"Eight is fine. Grab some breakfast. You wouldn't like what we offer here at the station, believe me."

*Is the old boy softening up a bit?*

\*\*\*

Police stations were often tips, even newer ones. Coppers often weren't tidy, and their clientele could care less, especially if they were vagrants or sots. But at least Esther didn't have to sleep in a cell where the stench and muck would be even worse. And the small room behind the one-way glass where she stood with a uniformed constable was probably cleaner than the interrogation room that had graffiti on the walls and initials carved on its table.

They made short work of suspect number one. He had a solid alibi for the night of the heist, and she knew the coppers didn't expect he'd lie about something that could be so easy to confirm. Number two was more known for jewelry store robberies, not residences. He'd been in the nick for five and had been freed for good behavior. It wasn't clear he had the skills either. Robbing a jewelry store didn't require much beyond brazen stupidity.

Number three, the Dutchman, interested Esther more. He'd refused legal representation, and she could understand why: He parried all Gregg and Shaw's thrusts with ease, although in some cases he only said, "No comment." He was a cut above the average thief too—suave and sophisticated—making Esther see similarities with Pierce Brosnan in the 1999 remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair*. Van Loon was a suave and sophisticated rake as well, and he had come dressed to the nines in a three-piece suit. *Is jewelry theft that profitable, or did he get a nice dosh from selling the paintings?*

Thoroughly frustrated with the man, the two coppers took a break; Esther joined them in the corridor outside the interrogation room.

"The last bloke is my preferred suspect," she said. "He might have a technical background."

"We're trying to check on that background." Gregg glanced at Shaw. "Go see if the lads got any joy learning about his history—any form in Holland, for example." After Shaw left, Gregg turned to Esther. "Sorry to get you up so early, Mrs. Brookstone."

"No problem, Inspector. I was a bit knackered, I'll admit, but I had enough sleep. Probably indigestion. My fish the night before was a bit spicy."

"You think he might be the one?"

"Possibly. With that braggadocio, I'd wager he's already been paid for the paintings. Let's make him nervous enough to regret that. I also confirm provenance and restore old paintings in my gallery. Tell him I believe Zeke's paintings were fakes, although Zeke didn't believe me when I told him."

He smiled. "That might make him think the buyer, the one who'll auction them off, will come after Klaus when he learns that. I'll tell your preferred suspect we're releasing your opinion to the media." He eyed Esther. "I like the way you think, madame. But won't that put you in danger?"

"Not if you have some strong, young DC protecting me...on the sly, of course."

From the way Klaus van Loon blanched when Gregg told him about the fake paintings, Esther not only knew he'd stolen them but had sold them to an auctioneer who thought they were real.

The game was afoot...and it was indeed a game, one where she waned checkmate.

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Klaus soon learned who Esther Brookstone was. *The Masters Gallery* was well enough known, had sponsored several important showings, and the owner was a well-known restorer and authenticator of old paintings. He'd concluded that the old jeweler had been scammed; and Klaus, as a consequence, had scammed the auctioneer who'd given him a tidy sum for the stolen paintings, most likely figuring he would make that back ten times over. While Klaus just might kill Brookstone out of revenge sometime in the future, now he'd have to look out for himself first.

He'd always wanted to see Ireland. He packed, cleaned out his bank account, and headed for the train station. It would take him west to the ferry.

He didn't get very far. A thug backed him up against the wall in the men's loo and showed Klaus the afternoon paper. The headline said, "Art Thief Steals Fake Paintings!"

"Mr. Meadows would like his money back, Klaus. Now!"

The Newcastle Police nicked both of them outside the loo. The thug tried to run one way. He had a knife and was harder to capture than Klaus, who had tried going the other way. Klaus knew it was hopeless, so he held out his hands for the cuffs. He was a bit more comfortable on the trip to the station than the thug whose hands were behind his back.

Esther arrived a bit after Klaus's admission to stealing the paintings. He said he'd been looking for jewelry; the mansion's owner was a jeweler, after all. He also testified about what the thug had said to him in the loo.

Behind the window, Esther smiled. Klaus probably figured he'd be safer in Newcastle's nick from anyone else the auctioneer might hire.

Gregg and Shaw began to interrogate the thug. He'd requested legal representation. They would have to break the two down. Would he give up the real name of the auctioneer? Klaus had said he only knew him as Meadows.

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The thug's name was Jack Dunn. He had form, which helped the interrogators: A longer term for second offenders was always possible and a threat both Dunn and his police-supplied brief understood. But Dunn was also a stubborn man, and the lawyer had taught him how to say, "No comment."

Newcastle didn't have the number of CCTV cameras that London did, but while Gregg and Shaw went round and round grilling Dunn, who was dumber than van Loon but more difficult because he was stubborn, other coppers were busily viewing video records.

Esther saw a DC call Gregg out of the room. She was sure that meant the plods had new information.

Gregg reentered and took his seat. He smiled at Dunn and slid a photo across to him. "Is this Mr. Meadows, otherwise known as Christian Hilton, auctioneer of expensive, stolen paintings and other artwork?"

"I don't know what his business is."

The solicitor had tried to restrain his client, but it was too late.

"Let the record show that Mr. Dunn indeed knows Mr. Hilton aka Mr. Meadows," Shaw said for the video recording.

Dunn looked dismayed at his lawyer, who scowled at him and shrugged. "The implication, Jack, is that you do know him," the barrister said, agreeing with Shaw's pronouncement. To the coppers he said, "But my client also implied that he doesn't know what Mr. Hilton does for a living."

"We have Mr. van Loon's testimony that Mr. Hilton ordered your client to threaten the thief in order to recuperate his investment. Is that right, Mr. Dunn?"

Dunn nodded. "I'd just have given him stick, though, not kill him."

The solicitor groaned.

"For the record, just answer yes or no," Shaw said.

The thug said yes. Gregg dashed out. Esther knew they'd now arrest the auctioneer and, with a warrant, would recover Zeke's paintings.

*My work in Newcastle is done, she thought. I can now go home.*

## Epilogue

Bastiann looked up from his laptop when Esther entered their flat.

"How are you doing, Luv?" he said.

"Knackered." She held up a bag. "*Tikka masala* and *samosas*."

"Put it on the counter. I'll serve it. Sit down and I'll bring you a glass of Shiraz. Californian wine prices have gone up again, by the way."

"More government tariffs, I'd wager."

"Any joy for Ezekiel?"

"The plods recovered the paintings. They'll release them to Zeke when he returns from Antwerp."

"Excellent!"

"And your work?"

"We made progress, Hal and I. Enough to hand off to the NCA for a raid."

"NCA?"

"MI5 decided that there were too many local crime organizations involved."

"I see." She smiled. "So, you're free for the holidays?"

"I am. Merry Christmas, Esther. It seems like we'll now have some time off to be together."

SAMPLE

## **The Upside-Down Termite Mound**

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### **Preface**

Because I also write sci-fi, I couldn't resist creating a sci-fi detective. (I'm not sure I've previously done that, so maybe it was about time? And a first?)

Isaac Asimov is perhaps more famous for his *Foundation* trilogy and subsequent novels extending the trilogy to a long series where he brought together the robot and *Foundation* novels in one marvelous vision of human beings' future in the galaxy, a future without ETs (how that happened, he said, is explained in his novel, *The End of Eternity*, so that must be considered part of the extended series). Two of those robot novels are unusual and very special, though: *Caves of Steel* and *The Naked Sun* are sci-fi mysteries, i.e., they involve sleuthing detectives far into the future. Asimov was an avid mystery fan.

I'm also a mystery fan as well as sci-fi fan. One could say that any story set in the future is sci-fi (although some authors like Atwood incorrectly call the latter "speculative fiction," which is a more general classification and too general for my taste), so the question remains: Does a sci-fi story also become something else when it contains romance, mystery, thrills, suspense, or something else? I'll let the genre police ponder that question; its answer stirs little interest in me. All I'll say is that the following story could be called a sci-fi mystery inspired by those two Asimov novels, albeit a lot grittier than Isaac's stories (different times!).

And, to counter those romantic visions of Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk and the rabid fans and followers of those rich boys with their expensive toys, the following is also both a dystopian and post-apocalyptic story, a vision of what life in Martian colonies might become if we carry a post-apocalyptic Earth's problems to the red planet. You'll either enjoy it or hate it, but, of course, that tautology is always true of any story, short fiction or novel!

### **Prologue**

"Get in!" the councilman's bodyguard said to the councilman's son. He gestured to the empty seat next to him. The son looked at him with disdain, a spoiled brat who was out of control.

"I'm waiting for someone. I still have the urge. Go away!"

"No, you're not waiting for anyone. Not anymore!"

"Did my old man send you? I'll call him and tell him to fuck off! And to fire you as well."

The bodyguard ripped the implant out of its socket in the young man's head. "You're offline now, and out of line. You're in danger!"

"Who says? My father? He always lies."

"I say! I know what you've been up to. You're setting yourself up for a mindwipe!"

"Go to hell!"

The bodyguard circled the vehicle. A right hook felled the young man. The bodyguard put the organic cuffs on the son's wrists and legs, threw him over the shoulder, and packed him into the little three-wheeled cart as if the son were a piece of luggage. The bodyguard then got onboard, made a U-turn in the tunnel, and headed off along the red-zone's corridor filled with the colony's scum.



## Chapter One

Garth stepped out of the small robotaxi, his tall, lean frame creating a problem in the egress; retrieved his valise with a frown; and walked into the hotel's crowded lobby, scanning his surroundings and the people. He didn't like First Colony or its crowds. Being something of a historian, he knew the original Chinese colonists had felt right at home there after living in China's over-populated cities, but their descendants only enjoyed a slim majority now in the largest city on Mars.

Many might not think First Colony was as claustrophobic as Olympus, his home, because the former's levels and tunnels now covered a much larger area, but with people jostling and pushing in every level and every corridor and tunnel, here and there, even the residential ones, that perception was understandable. He smiled. *The home team's the favorite!* The hectic pace in either city didn't help either.

He checked in. When he turned away from the reception desk, he expected to see other anxious travelers waiting in line, but he was face-to-face with a shorter, corpulent man waiting to shake his hand.

"Ralph Jameson, Inspector. Welcome to First Colony."

Garth grasped the man's hand and made a little chin-bow. "I've been here before, Chief Jameson. Our meeting was scheduled for tomorrow afternoon."

"Indeed, so it was...and it still is. But it's with my department heads. I thought I'd brief you before that. Over lunch today."

"I have the facts of the case."

"But not recent developments. Forensics, for example."

"I see. I can hardly go over forensics data during lunch, but, if you must, we can chat. Let me get installed in my room first. Shall I join you in this hotel's restaurant in twenty minutes?"

"That's fine. See you there. I'll go early to find a nice table...and a martini."

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Once in his small room, not that much larger than its closet, Garth took a tiny wand from his valise and ran it over walls and ceilings of the room, closet, and tiny attached bathroom. Bugs were signaled by a red light and a chime; there were three. He took a penknife out of the valise and dug them out of the walls. They might have been left over from spying on some previous occupant, but he couldn't take the chance. He'd have to warn Jewel. *Perhaps lend her the wand?* His partner traveled lighter than he did.

Ralph Jameson was Police Chief of First Colony. Garth didn't envy him. Those positions were mostly political and subject to pressures from above and below. Garth Vasiliev was Detective Inspector in the Olympus PD's homicide division, and he knew his own chief felt the pressures of his job. *Poor Jameson's must be doubly hard!*

Ralph had a murder he couldn't solve; Garth was there on loan so he could solve it, a request made by the first man. Knowing the corruption in the First Colony's city government—Olympus had its own special brand—Garth suspected that the request represented a lot more than just a simple favor one police chief had granted to the other.

He confirmed that suspicion at lunch. After appetizers—the name an oxymoron because there was only so much you could do with tofu—Ralph became talkative, perhaps because he

was already well into his second martini. They had switched on the privacy screen once Garth was seated, but the man's voice was still almost a whisper even in that noise-free, secure environment.

"You might be wondering why my people can't handle this murder case."

"The question had crossed my mind sir." Garth wasn't about to voice his suspicions.

"Simply stated, I don't trust them. I fear some of them receive extra pay under the table from our criminal gangs, if you know what I mean? Not all, but I don't know which ones do."

"I know what you mean sir. When criminal elements know too much about our practices and tactics, it's logical to suspect there are those among us who are leaking information."

"You're very perceptive, Inspector Vasiliev."

"You may call me Garth."

"So, how will you go about running your investigation?"

"As I usually do. I shall come to your HQ tomorrow and delve into the details of the case to start."

"And talk with the agent-in-charge?"

"No. He might be compromised. My partner will be arriving tomorrow. We will work alone. Keeping you informed, of course."

"I see. How many days will I have you two?"

"Our police chief has given me *carte blanche*. Apparently, you and he are old friends?"

"That's how I came to know about you and your strange ways." Garth raised an eyebrow. Ralph laughed. "He calls you a throwback!"

"His word for traditionalist, I presume." Garth tapped his head. "They have yet to invent a better method for bringing criminals to justice. We have fingerprints, blood types, DNA, GPR, and so forth, but one still needs a human mind to put all that evidence together and make an arrest. Computer programs can't do the job."

"What's GPR?"

"Ground Penetrating Radar. They often use it on Earth for finding where a body is buried. Or did. I've suggested its use here a few times."

"I see. Not much call for that on Mars. The killer would have to go outside the city."

Garth nodded. "That could be done in a spacesuit. I suspect the killer wouldn't worry too much about decompression of the body."

"I can't remember a case like that."

"I can't either. But it's possible. Criminal minds might be warped, but they can be devilishly inventive."

## Chapter Two

After lunch with the chief, Garth took a stroll through the vertical city. He knew it well, of course, or what it had been. He'd trained in its academy long ago, the only place on Mars for training future police officers.

First Colony was similar to Olympus, the city he now called home. That city often in the anemic shadows of the planet's tallest mountain, the one the city dwellers simply called Mons, had been the fifth Martian "colony," although that word was a mere historical curiosity most people only knew like the name of the city in which he now strolled.

*Strolling is perhaps an inappropriate word?* The crowds carried him along. Out of boredom one day, he'd once read about termites, interesting Earth insects (there were none on

Mars except cockroaches that other vermin like rats ate—how either one arrived on Mars was lost in antiquity). Those insects built mounds and lived in the interior tunnels and chambers. Martian cities were like that, only the mounds along with their tunnels and chambers went down, not up.

Other differences also existed. In the human constructions, everything was artificial, including the air. Moreover, humans weren't necessarily social creatures, although they were forced to live on Mars like termites. That often meant that aberrations in the human psyche occurred that led to more frequent and violent crimes compared to those that remained in the few human populations on Earth where large cities no longer existed.

He let the city's teeming masses carry him along, observing their behavioral patterns, assimilating language differences, and noting what vendors in the tunnels bought and sold. All that was more intense in First Colony than in Olympus. His task would be difficult. *How will I filter out the noise to capture the signal of a murderer who stalked this old city?*

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"You look a bit out of sorts," Jewel Zuberi said. "All the madness of this big old city not letting you sleep well?"

"Yes, there's madness here; and yes, I didn't sleep well. And, in my haste to catch the shuttle, I forgot my violin."

"Lucky me. I think I have the room next to yours."

He had met her in the lobby upon her arrival. "That is indeed the case."

"The chief here must be a bit tight-fisted with funding," she said, looking around. "This hotel is old."

"It's adequate...and apparently popular. We meet with the chief and his department heads tomorrow. I found a nice place for dinner when I took a stroll around before."

"Nearby, I hope. The crowds are oppressive."

"It's across from another hotel that you probably would have preferred. Apparently, the city's planners wanted to group all the tourists together."

"I think this area was originally filled with hydroponic vats. And hard to imagine the city having had much planning. It's like a cancerous tumor."

He smiled. "You'll have to mind your tongue a bit here. Some of our words have different meanings, and these city dwellers have shorter tempers. I believe it comes from the crowding."

"Already analyzing them, I see. Give me half an hour. We can then take another stroll. There's a small park at the junction of several tunnels; it has a fountain I want to see. Not a holographic image, but a real fountain. We then can dine."

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Garth had little use for ornaments or art; he was a practical man. He had even less use for a water fountain that served no practical purpose, although he supposed tourist guides probably claimed it was both ornament and art. It was all covered by a transparent bubble so none of the precious water was lost, not even to normal evaporation, a technique more liked forced upon engineers who had no way to calculate the fountain's effect on overall humidity levels. As useless decorations went, he supposed the streams shooting up inside the bubble provided some aesthetic delight to those few who would watch them dance and intertwine, but most in the

crowds passed by without even a glance. *Maybe one could call it art?* If so, the crowds weren't artistically inclined.

He considered it a monument to frustration: Human beings hadn't healed Mars all that much, just like they hadn't healed Earth after previous generations had damaged it. Good intentions could only go so far; what was left was frustration. Human beings could only add entropy; they could only destroy in the long run.

Sometimes they destroyed one another. His mind inevitably turned to the murder case. What was the old Earth adage? Jewel and he would have to find a needle in a haystack, a city filled with millions of needles, everyone more or less alike to the casual eye, but only one guilty of murder.

He had no idea what a haystack was.

### Chapter Three

The meeting with Ralph Jameson's department heads didn't go well. First, it was clear that they didn't like their chief's bringing Jewel and Garth in from outside the city. In a sense, Garth couldn't blame them for that, but he also thought Jameson's reasoning was sound: No local cop had solved the murder, and it was obvious to Garth, although he didn't vocalize that opinion, that they had no desire to do so. The son of a powerful councilman was the only person-of-interest for the murder of a prostitute.

Second, it was also obvious that competition between the two Martian cities, First Colony and Olympus, would make any collaboration with local police, beyond the police chief, virtually impossible. That competition went all the way up to the mayoral level. In more ancient times on Earth, the two cities might have fought a war like Athens and Sparta, but the hostile Martian environment, a barrier much worse than Napoleon had faced with a Russian winter or Putin had faced with the Ukrainian one, and Ukrainian existence, limited the hostility considerably.

Whatever the reasons, Jewel and Garth would be working alone.

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All the two got from the meeting was assigned office space in the SVU level of First Colony's Police HQ, the SVU being an appropriate location considering the occupation of the victim. Prostitution was banned in both cities that Garth knew, but that hadn't eliminated human beings' oldest profession because enforcement of the ban was lax and unscrupulous pimps, who often bribed cops to look the other way with services or cash, continued to bring young people, males as well as females, into their "stables" in order to meet the demand.

Garth found all that distasteful because he knew the problem's cause was rooted in those who created the demand and those who met it, both groups exploiting the young who often had few other means to make a living. A slightly more lucrative one could be made as an ice miner at the Martian poles, but neither mining nor prostitution led to a long lifespan. If First Colony was anything like Olympus, he expected there would be dozens of bodies every day waiting to be recycled for their organic materials necessary to keep the hydroponics farms flourishing. A good number of these would be "sex workers" and "homeless," as the official records listed the two largest groups. Some would be members of both groups, of course.

With their office came personal connections to the city's AI. Its official name was "City Information, Data, and Electoral Resources," or CIDER, which reminded Garth of an Earth

beverage he'd once read about. It must have reminded the city's builders of that too, because the AI's nickname was SOT. The metaphor stopped there because SOT's voice was a pleasant female one without any trace of artificiality or inebriation.

Jewel and Garth had the implant devices in their heads recalibrated for SOT, and he was pleased that the connection with the AI was a bit better than the one achievable with Olympus's AI. Moreover, they had access to First Colony's crime database that included details about the poorer sectors of the city where the victim, Reni Mallow, had lived and died. SOT said she would do her best for Jewel and Garth, but he knew she couldn't offer information about everything going on in the city, or completely predict what they were doing for the simple reason that human beings were so unpredictable. He supposed the law of large numbers might make possible one day if human beings spread out through the galaxy and colonized more hospitable worlds.

Garth could now converse with both Jewel and SOT via his implant, so he heard Jewel's observation: "We should start with a visit to Reni's red zone, Garth."

He looked at his watch. "No time like the present," he said to her. "Guide us there, SOT," he said to the AI.

"It will be my pleasure," the sweet voice said softly in their ears.

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Red Zone #3 deserved its bad reputation. The zones in First Colony weren't areas but volumes, places in the upside-down termite mound that more or less indicated the economic wellbeing of the city's citizens who lived there. Blue corresponded to the wealthy, whose total incomes were often hidden from prying eyes; green to the middle class formed by people on a payroll, either as public servants or workers for the wealthy; and red for all those who were misfits, outcasts, or fallen from favor. Public services were most scarce in the red zones, and the homeless, those who could neither pay rents nor had the skills required for gainful employment, slept in the tunnels, most of which reeked of feces and urine. From his meager knowledge of Earth's history, he knew that situation hadn't been uncommon in Earth's large cities.

Jewel and Garth had come prepared with nose filters. They received a few stares as they walked, most of them blank, the owners of those eyes either uncaring or with minds lost in alternate realities generated by drugs. Prostitution was banned, although the ban wasn't enforced; drug use wasn't and was considered a good way to keep city dwellers pacified. The assumption was that their bodies would soon be recycled, something of benefit to the community.

Garth was enough of a student of history to know that all their society's decay had begun on Earth. The colonists had brought Earth's problems with them, nearly all of them, in fact. The exceptions were war and global warming. Wars between Martian colonies were unthinkable, and the red planet's climate had become toxic millions of years ago. They used an incredible amount of energy to maintain the artificial environments of the upside-down termite colonies, but there was an incredible amount available from the reactors spread across the red planet's surface.

"I have the pimp in sight," SOT announced, sending video along with her warning.

Garth directly followed the man who'd had spotted them as well, while Jewel took an alternate route. It was a simple pincer movement they'd often used in Olympus. She appeared in front of the fleeing pimp, who stopped, turned, and rushed at Garth. The detective took out his stun gun and shot the man.

While Jewel sprayed the cuffs on him, Garth said, "Jeb Dalton, you are a person of interest for the murder of Reni Mallow. You will be held in custody for questioning. You have no right to legal representation during that time, which can be extended as long as we see fit."

Garth called for a patrol robocar. The little three-wheeled vehicle took the three of them through a maze of corridors to the nearest police substation.

## Chapter Four

The organic cuffs now had Dalton restrained differently, his back to a wall so he faced them across the little table with its embedded video screens that could show bigger versions of graphics SOT sent to their implants.

"When was the last time you saw Reni?" Jewel asked the pimp.

Garth had wanted her to interrogate the lowlife while he studied his body language.

"Who's Reni?" Dalton said in a raspy voice.

Jewel nodded to Garth, and he told SOT to loosen the neck collar a bit. "We have ample evidence that you employed her, Jeb. Who was her last trick? I'm sure you had to know about it. Pimps like you don't let their stable members act on their own. Too much chance they'll skim off the top, or not even give you your share. Your type takes an order from a john and sends a girl off to service him. Or boy, as the case might be. So, who was Reni's last client? Who did you send her to?"

"I can be here for hours and not say anything, you know."

"You can be here for as long as it takes you to die, and then we'll just send your body to recycling. Of course, you'll be peeing and shitting in your fancy pants long before that." She nodded after Garth sent her a suggestion via SOT. "Or we can just send you to holding where you can await trial for promoting prostitution, exploiting young girls and boys, and murdering Reni Mallow. That's one and done in our courts, good for a mindwipe at least."

Jeb blanched, an interesting phenomenon considering his body ink. "Um, what deal can I make if I give you information about Reni?"

"Depends on the information you provide," Jewel said.

"Her last john. That's all I know. 'Course, I never collected."

"That's useful information. Let's hope it helps our investigation."

"It's Councilman Wu's son, the half-breed."

SOT flashed Fred Wu's bio to them at Garth's request. "Locate this man," he sub vocally ordered the AI, still part of the trilateral connection.

"Not possible," SOT said in their heads. "His chip has been removed."

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Garth and Jewel together now met with Ralph Jameson in their hotel's restaurant. This time Garth handled the interrogation.

"I now know why your department wasn't been keen on investigating Reni Mallow's murder." Jameson was about to object, but Garth held up his hand as if he were a traffic robot at an intersection of main corridors. "Let me speak! Councilman Wu asked you not to pursue the investigation, but you have more balls than the councilman expected. You pursued it, but indirectly by asking your friend, my chief, to have us do it, probably to protect yourself from the councilman's wrath and because outsiders wouldn't have much luck away from their home turf so

the son would remain free. Or maybe you just wanted to protect your organization from the mayor's wrath. Which is it, Chief Jameson? Be truthful with your answer. I'll know if you're lying."

Jameson's face had gone from red to pale white. He looked around the restaurant. It was empty except for the three of them, and the privacy shields were up. "How dare you!" he hissed. "You're off the case. And I'm reporting you to your chief."

Garth smiled. "I expected that to be your answer. We are off the case by our own choosing. And we're sending a full report to our chief, the governor's office, your mayor, Councilman Wu, and several clandestine media outlets a lot of people use. They'll all make their own conclusions and decide how to proceed. I suspect that neither my chief nor the governor will be too happy, although it's only another case of corruption at the top. Even SOT thinks you should be charged, by the way, along with Councilman Wu. Frankly, I'd be just as satisfied if someone captures Fred Wu and gives him a mindwipe."

Jameson slammed a fist on the table. He then stood and shook the same fist at them. "I'll have you both fired!"

"Don't be repetitive. You're welcome to try. I'd recommend that you sit back down and enjoy your meal, though. It might be your last good one, who knows? I hear the tofu crabcakes here are appetizers to die for."

## Note from Steve

You have just finished reading *Detectives*, my free PDF featuring some sleuths who might be old friends from my novels along with some new ones. I hope you've enjoyed reading these tales as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Because this short fiction collection is free, I won't suggest you review it, but I'd love to hear from you about what you think about it. You can use the contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>, to let me know your thoughts. I love feedback from both readers and authors.

For other free PDFs you can download, see the list on my "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at the above website.

And here are some of my other mystery/thriller works that you might also enjoy (published, so not free, with a few exceptions, but reasonably priced all the same):

### *"Detectives Chen and Castilblanco Series"*

The Midas Bomb  
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Rembrandt's Angel  
Son of Thunder  
Death on the Danube  
Palettes, Patriots, and Prats  
Leonardo and the Quantum Code  
Defanging the Red Dragon\*  
Intolerance\*\*  
The Klimt Connection

\*A crossover novel, and a free PDF download

\*\*Another novel that's a free PDF download

Some of the stories in this collection are British-style mysteries. For more, see the collections titled *Sleuthing, British-Style*. The first volume was published and is even available on Amazon. (The major reason for that was to experiment with the Draft2Digital publishing software, not for any love for that huge retailer, but I also have some other collections there—*Sleuthing* and the other collections on Amazon are inexpensive.) The second two volumes are free PDF downloads.

### *"Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries"*



Muddlin' Through  
Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By  
Goin' the Extra Mile

And don't forget A. B. Carolan's sci-fi mysteries for young adults (and adults who are young at heart):

The Secret Lab  
The Secret of the Urns  
Mind Games  
Origins

For more novels and short story collections, see the "Books & Short Stories" web page at my website.

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

## Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

I like to write short fiction. It's a way to practice minimalist writing because it has to be economical. Authors don't have an entire novel to develop their story elements—theme, plot, characters, settings, and dialogue—but all these still have to be present. Writing short fiction also allows authors to explore new ideas, as I've done with British-style mysteries. And short fiction represents a dash (short story) or middle-distance race (novella) compared to a marathon (novel), so a lot of time isn't loss on failures. (You only see what I consider successfully completed races here.) For authors looking to improve their art, short fiction offers a lot of positives.

For making money from writing, though, short fiction isn't all that great. Collections and anthologies don't sell that well, and it's more difficult to get a story published in a 'zine, which pays next to nothing in royalties, than to get a novel published, which has better chances to develop an audience as well as better royalties.

I'll confess that when I start a story, though, I have no idea whether it will become a short story, novella, or novel. It all depends on what the themes, plots, and characters allow. That doesn't mean that my short fiction stories are inferior or lacking in some way—they're just gold nuggets among the novelistic gold ingots that readers have access to. (That's alluding to the fact that I never let bad stories reach readers.)

I continue to write short fiction for the positives that I mentioned, and I give it away to readers because of those negatives. I think that's a better plan than most authors have, i.e., just writing novels. At the very least, my free short fiction might motivate readers to try my novels, which is a hell of a lot better than giving away novels (although I've done that too!)

That said, some readers might wonder why I give away so many free PDFs. For the short fiction, which the above short stories and novellas are, the answer is easy: It takes as long or longer to get short fiction published as it does a novel. And too many 'zine editors, online or otherwise, throw up more roadblocks than any other publisher, all for royalties that are pennies compared to novels. I prefer to spend my submission efforts for novels.

In brief, I love to tell stories, all kinds, and I hope some readers find them as entertaining to read as I did writing them. I probably will never be a celebrated and famous writer, but what I do with my stories isn't motivated by desires for fame or making money. I have neither constraint, so I can tell and publish my stories as I see fit.

Because this project was 100% DIY, I'll only laud my wife of many years, who not only has the patience for my writing but has also become my best friend and cheerleader. Other authors should be so lucky to have a companion like her!

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 in Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but postponed that dream to work in academia and R&D as a physicist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the US, for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley.

Steve writes sci-fi, mysteries, and thrillers, short fiction, blog articles, and book and movie reviews. He has written many novels, including four for young adults under the pen name A.B. Carolan; his list of works includes six series. He also has published four short story collections.

Steve's blog at [stevenmmoore.com](http://stevenmmoore.com), his author's website, discusses reading, writing, and the publishing business; and his blog at [pubprogressive.com](http://pubprogressive.com) discusses current events and politics. He also has a Facebook author page and is active on Twitter. He connects with authors and other people in the publishing industry via LinkedIn, and he's also a member of International Thriller Writers. He and his wife now live just outside New York City.

You can learn more about Steve and his writing at his author's website. Use the contact page there to communicate with him.