

The Detectives

Volume Two:

“The Earl of Penrith”

**A Collection of Short Crime Fiction
in the British-Mystery Style**

Steven M. Moore

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Preface

As many of my blog readers know as well as family and friends, to get through the Covid pandemic, I did a lot of reading and writing. British-style mystery stories played an important role in this process—binge-reading entire series of novels as well as writing many of my own. (Readers can see that influence as the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series has progressed.) Here's the second collection, featuring only one British sleuth and his young sergeant in this case. Others can be found in the first "Detectives" collection as well as in the three *Sleuthing*, *British-Style* collections. (Those have a glossary of British words and phrases readers might not be familiar with. So do many of the British-style mystery books I've read. You might want to try some.)

The stories here 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 feature Detective Inspector Earl Wilson and Detective Sergeant Sally Hill who work out of rural substation in the Penrith Police District.

The Lake District (Penrith and points east in England) has always fascinated me. One British mystery series I read featured Inspector Skelgill; these were difficult to read at first because the author used third-person present and head-hopped a lot, which can be challenging for any reader, but I was taken in by the Lake District's rustic beauty of lakes (Skelgill doesn't call them that) and mountains (he doesn't call them that either). The area was a main character in "Prodigal Son" found in *Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume 3*, but I felt that the Lake District deserved a revisit, more than just another setting for Philippa and Hal's vacation in the third "Inspector Steve Morgan novel. As is my custom, I've rewritten and reedited these stories for this free and downloadable PDF; as a consequence, they're a bit longer than the originals. (In fact, the fourth story is completely original!)

Earl Wilson was a candidate for the starring role in the novels following the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series (these became the "Inspector Steve Morgan" series), but he seemed a bit too old to receive the baton from Esther and Bastiann van Coevorden, wrinklies themselves. (I almost used him as the Penrith connection in *Cult of Evil* too.) Who knows? He might star in another Steve Morgan novel sometime soon. For now, you can enjoy this old master crimefighter's tales.

The stories contained in this collection have no hugely important themes, unlike many of my British-style mystery novels. (See the list in the note at the end.) They are more police procedurals about greedy blokes, scams, and murders. The last story is a bit dark, but I'm sure real British crimefighting activities are often a lot darker. None are cozy mysteries, though. Human beings can be quite evil just in their ordinary criminal activities.

Steve Moore

Montclair, NJ, 2023

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The Novelist

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There were three people left when the publican announced closing time at *The Pink Hippo*. The writer Declan Flaherty decided that was okay; he needed a fag anyway. He stuffed the notes he'd made on napkins into his coat pocket, finished his second pint, and left the establishment to the plump publican and the old tippling couple, winking at the old woman. He'd dedicated an entire napkin to them because they still seemed very much in love.

She'd probably known he was a stranger, though. He wasn't a tall man but wiry and muscular. She might even see him as a handsome bloke and wondered who he was. Some women saw the introverted author that way, perhaps identifying him with one of his protagonists if they knew his books; some men were jealous when they eyed him, especially at book events. Usually the women were the ones who read his novels, mystery/thriller stories that had an eclectic mix of romance and suspense, plots, themes, and settings often taken from the notes he collected. If the men came along to his book events, they often did so reluctantly. Of course, that was a common occurrence in any cultural event in Greater London. Men were stereotypically sports addicts; women were a bit more eclectic with their entertainment choices. Obviously, he depended on the women more than the men, hence the wink.

He wasn't sure that the Lake District was comparable to London in that regard, of course. Certainly *The Pink Hippo* pub's setting wouldn't be one used for a cultural event, but he liked the out-of-the-way places to have a pint or two and study the local clientele. Those notes might eventually be used in some future novel. Their number had increased after he left the more posh *Riverside Inn* that was nearer Penrith center.

Outside he stopped at the edge of the little square and lit up. That gave his eyes time to adjust to the dim light. There were only four anemic street lamps at each corner of the small cobblestone-covered square, their light diminished even further by their dirty glass covers. *Part of the charm*, Flaherty thought. *Peace and quiet that were hard to find in London*. So were clear and starry skies and crisp, clean air. One could die of boredom in the north, but one would probably live longer and die happier.

He'd had the idea to set his next novel or two in the Lake District, part of Cumbria and a scenic and rustic area filled with vistas not found anywhere else in England. Or in the world, for that matter. The largest city was Penrith; it was much nearer the Irish Sea than where he was at. The square and its pub were more inland in a hamlet farther east. Penrith was smaller than nearby cities south of there—Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester among them. He knew most of them but not Penrith nor the area around it until now.

He followed his usual practice: Scout out the area, get an idea about the locals, their habits, and their speech patterns, and just jot down ideas in general—he called the latter what-ifs and possible themes, and they might later be woven through and around the eventual plot. In this case, one idea was that major cities south of the area would bring their crime into the area around Penrith, their gangs looking to expand their territories. Not exactly smart from the business perspective—the population was smaller—but maybe the competition would be less if they were the first to get their foot in the door.

The night became less clear as clouds heavy with rain started rolling in. He'd already had a few clear ones when the sky filled with stars would be an amateur astronomer's delight, many more stars than one could see in those big cities. That night it could become foggy, though; except for the quaintness of the surrounding buildings, one could then imagine he was in some squalid

London neighborhood—no rain but wet fog blowing all the way in from the coast just west of Penrith.

He'd finished half the cigarette and was wondering to toss the rest—he was trying to taper off—when he saw a man come out of an alleyway and walk towards him. *Another tippler about to be disappointed that the pub had closed?* He just managed to understand how wrong that guess was when the man pulled out a gun and started shooting.

“Good that you could join us,” Doc Simpson said to the arriving coppers. “You two deserved to have your slumbers disturbed too.”

Harry the SOCO glanced at Doc and then smiled and winked at the new arrivals. “Doc’s always in a great mood, isn’t he?”

Of course, DI Earl Wilson and DS Sally Hill knew this was an instance of Harry’s habitual and sarcastic irony. Yet two hours before dawn was a time when most people in that Lake District’s hamlet where the shooting had occurred would indeed be sleeping—an *ungodly hour*, Earl thought.

He was a police veteran who had started out as a patrol constable in London, a “bobby” or “top” as they were called, the latter for the helmet—and then bounced around after being promoted from PC to DC and finally DI, finally ending up in the Lake District, where he suspected he would retire someday because he loved hiking and fishing.

He was a big bear of a man, an oversized version of that American telly detective, Columbo, complete with an old car and dirty raincoat, but he didn’t smoke cigars and didn’t drink much. In fact, for his age, he was in good shape. A criminal might outrun him, but they’d be hard-pressed to outfight him. He had once broken one’s jaw, but he’d gone to the hospital later to apologize to the hand-cuffed scrote for doing so.

Sally was from the other coast and loathed southern England as much as Earl did. Her birthplace was Morpeth, a regional capital not far from Newcastle-on-Tyne, so she felt right at home in Penrith, which might be considered a left-coast capital in comparison to Morpeth, without any polical meanings intended—the entire area on the border with Scotland was a conservative one.

Twenty years younger than her Guv, she was coming into her own as Earl’s partner in policing. She was fleet of foot and good enough at martial arts to compensate for her small size, as many a criminal had discovered. She also could turn on the charm, though, if she felt inclined or needed to do so in an interview or interrogation.

Ignoring Doc Simpson, who was indeed always of sour disposition at best, Earl said to Harry, “Mind if we look around?”

“No, as long as you stay outside my five-meter circle around Doc here, but tread carefully.”

Earl jerked a thumb at the nearest of the two vans, one an ambulance parked next to the SOCO’s van. “Do we have witnesses?” He was referring to a man and woman sitting at the back of the ambulance and swinging their legs back and forth as they drank tea.

Earl knew there’d been two ambulances. The first on the scene had rushed the shooting victim to the hospital with both blues and twos firing, surely a rude awakening for light sleepers in the hamlet and other along its way as it sped to the nearest NHS facility. The EMTs had given a good prognosis, though, so the two detectives would soon be visiting the victim.

“They found the victim. Fortunately.” Doc was packing up. Having no dead body to play with, the pathologist had only been collecting blood samples. There were plenty within that five-meter circle, so it was also where the victim had fallen.

“Go have a chinwag with them,” Earl told Sally. “I’m going to have that walk-around.”

Doc would eventually post reports about wounds and the possible ID of the weapon that had caused them on HOLMES, the national police database, the latter helped along by any rounds dug out of the victim at the hospital. Harry would add his contributions there as well. The rest of the investigation would be up to Sally and Earl.

As he walked around the small square, he decided there was no good hiding place available within it: No trees or walls to hide behind and no benches to sit on and pretend to be reading a paper, although that would be an absurd cover considering the dim light. A chemist’s shop wasn’t yet open and was on one side opposite the pub; it probably offered only a small variety of medicines, its business mostly limited to non-prescription over-the-counter items. Except for its sign, its facade looked like the rest of the buildings that contained cheap flats. The square was some distance from High Street and not in a safe part of town, but Earl knew the pub was popular with the locals. In summer months, swarming tourists might even find it, much to the locals’ disgust.

Four alleyways entered the square perpendicular to each side; they originated in surrounding streets. Earl checked out each one. In the third, he found the hideaway he’d searched for, a place where someone had waited to ambush the victim. The remains of a half dozen or more fags had been scattered around at one spot just inside the dark alley. He eyed the pub and confirmed that from where Doc was crouched the spot in the alleyway was invisible. The fags’ butts would provide DNA evidence, which wouldn’t do them much good in the investigation unless they had something on record to match...like a suspect’s swab!

By the time he walked back to the crime scene, Doc had left with the second ambulance and the couple had disappeared. Harry looked ready to scarper as well.

“You’ll want to check that alley over there,” he said to Harry, pointing to it. “I’m sure that’s where the shooter waited for his victim to come out of the pub.”

“Will do.”

Earl approached Sally, who was entering data into her mobile with a stylus. “Any joy from that couple?” She shook her head in the negative. “Let’s go then. Not much more we can do here. This was a pre-meditated attack. Maybe the victim, if he’s survived, can tell us the why or even the who. We’ll stop by the hospital on the way back to the station.”

“He might be a bit groggy, but he was talking to me,” the NHS ER doctor said. “Be brief, Inspector.”

Earl nodded. Sally and he walked to the patient’s room; Earl peeked in. “No surprise. The bloke’s watching BBC One. Looks comfy.” He entered; Sally followed. “DI Earl Wilson here, Mr. Flaherty. Feel up to answering some questions?”

Declan smiled. “I was wondering when rozzers would appear. Come in, Inspector.” He used the remote to turn off the telly. “I’ll just need a few sips of water for my dry mouth before I’m interrogated by you.”

Earl wondered how the victim could look so good after surgery where three bullets had been removed. He had them in an evidence bag already. They now knew he was an author, not a famous one but popular enough. His stubble and wild black hair was sprinkled with some gray, and his intelligent blue eyes had lost none of their clarity from the pain killers. Stretched out on

the hospital bed, Earl could see that he wasn't a tall man; he was muscular, though, and a bit pale now. *Who wouldn't be?* Not in bad shape considering, with a smile that Sally couldn't resist returning.

"Not an interrogation, Mr. Flaherty," she said. "We just need to hear what you know about the shooting to help us go out and find your assailant."

Declan eyed her. "The proverbial silent partner speaks, and a winsome and lovely lass she is. A much better sight for my tired eyes than you are, Inspector."

"DS Sally Hill, my sergeant," groused Earl. He pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat; she followed his lead on the other side and took out her mobile and stylus to take notes.

Is she showing leg to the Irishman? he asked himself. The brogue had been obvious from the start, not the Lake District dialect he now knew so well. Earl sorted the author's water.

"Now, Mr. Flaherty, if you would be so kind to go over the events of last night and this morning for us? Start by explaining how you, an obvious visitor to our area, came to choose that particular pub that's not well known to tourists."

The writer's answers to his questions were short, clear, and precise. Earl could tell he was a skilled observer. He supposed many fiction writers had to be like that to make their plots and characters come alive. Declan's trip to the pub, the second of the night, had been suggested by the woman who owned and ran the boarding house where he'd been staying. He wanted to experience some local color. *He got it! In his own red blood!* On second thought, that wasn't local: They needed more information about the man's background.

The writer explained why he was visiting the area, how he went about plotting his novels, and his background: Born in Cork, resident of Dublin then London, he even told them who his agent and publisher were. He also had no idea who had targeted him.

"Interesting bloke," Earl observed to Sally upon returning to their carpool vehicle parked in the hospital's car park. His own motor was on its last legs, so he often "borrowed" one of their station's little EVs that didn't have much range but could outrace the older and heavier patrol vehicles, especially with blues and twos clearing the way. "I'll let you interview that boarding house lady. Maybe one of her guests had some angry words with Mr. Flaherty? The Irish diaspora is still sometimes unpopular with locals. I'm going to make some calls, one to Flaherty's publishing house and the other to his agent. It's also possible Flaherty made someone angry in London who has followed him here. Either one might be able to tell me that."

She smiled. "A literary critic? I don't think the boarding house lady, publisher, or agent will offer up any useful leads."

"No stone unturned, I always say. Obviously someone targeted Declan Flaherty. They waited in that alleyway until he exited the pub and then shot him. It's our job to find out who and why."

The lady who ran the boarding house was also Irish but a longtime resident of the area, a widow named Mrs. O'Hara. She'd lived in the Lake District long enough that her Irish brogue was sprinkled with Cumbrian dialect. Sally had lived long enough in the area that she had no trouble understanding the mix.

"Mr. Flaherty writes novels, Sergeant. I have a few of them here, and he signed them for me. Imagine! 'Twas wonderful to meet a real writer, like. Hard to believe someone shot the poor man. Are you married, Sergeant Hill?"

"No, ma'am."

“Um, I’d go after him in a heartbeat if I were your age. ‘Course, my Mike were a handsome feller too. Dinna write. Could barely make it through reading our Penrith broadsheet. You ‘owt to chat’im up, lass. He’s not married either.”

Sally didn’t blush. People said lots of things in interviews, many of them inappropriate. A copper had to get used to it. “I’m really here to ask you how he got along with your other guests. Were there any barneys at your dinner table?”

“I offer breakfast and dinner plans, Sergeant. Right now I only have two other boarders, a missus and a feller. She’s Bonnie Ellison and has been with me for donkey’s years. She’s a nurse at the hospital. Randall Bradley’s a traveling salesman that’s with me every third week. ‘Course during tourist season, I’m full up. Twitchers, hikers, fishermen, and so forth, attracted to our great outdoors.”

“Did Mr. Flaherty have any barneys with Ms. Ellison or Mr. Bradley?”

“Not one, Luv. We all get along famously. One big happy family, like. Every dinner was a party among friends. They’re early enough so everyone can enjoy the nightlife afterwards if they’re keen on that.”

“Did you and Mr. Flaherty get along?”

“Famously. It was like having George Moore living under the same roof. And ‘twas a brilliant conversationalist too, he was.”

She knew Mr. Moore was a Irish novelist from the twentieth century’s early years. *Perhaps Mrs. O’Hara was well read?* “I understand that you recommended that pub to Mr. Flaherty. Any particular reason?”

“Aye. ‘Twas me Mike’s favorite. I used to go with him sometimes. Back then we’d play cards or do darts. I had no idea it had become that dangerous now, Sergeant.”

“He wasn’t shot in the pub, Mrs. O’Hara. And you couldn’t have known that someone wanted to kill him.”

“Aye, but I’ll think twice ‘bout recommending *The Pink Hippo* now.”

The publisher’s office in London put Earl through to the acquisition editor, a woman named Sally Field; she’d guided all of Flaherty’s novels from manuscripts to published books. She was aghast about what had occurred.

“I always told Declan to be careful. He had this thing about scouting around for local color. He’d often ride along with detectives at times, which wasn’t all that bad, but he’d also interview some unsavory characters too. I don’t know that any of them would want to shoot him, though. He’s harmless. And he always said that in his novels he changed names to protect the innocent as well as the guilty. He wrote fiction, after all.”

“Was he successful doing it?”

“Quite good, I dare say. He isn’t going to win any Nobel or Booker Prize, Inspector, but his books sell well enough. They’re mystery novels, crime novels to be precise, with lots of suspense and thrills, and even a bit of romance. In this business, a few successes often lead to more successes, even though it’s a competitive field.”

“What about his competition? Any jealous authors out there? Or someone who thinks that he stole their ideas?”

“Because he researched his stories so much, no one would dare claim plagiarism. Most authors skip the research, just using the local knowledge they already possess. I suppose there are a lot of jealous authors, but why would that lead them to shoot him? That just doesn’t happen, Inspector Wilson.”

Flaherty's agent who lived near the university city of Oxford was even less help. An Irish ex-pat as well, Flaherty was Sean Harris's only novelist. He mostly handled authors of children's books and academic authors, most of those university professors. The two had known each other at Trinity College in Dublin. Sean couldn't believe his friend had been shot either.

"You'll never meet a nicer person, Inspector. He's a bit introverted, so I think his publisher takes advantage of him sometimes. He's also a true storyteller. As we say in the old country, he has the blarney magic. My work with him now basically just involves helping him to get a manuscript ready. I only give them a cursory editing because his manuscripts are clean and the publisher has its own editing staff. The turnaround with them is a bit speedier now because his fan base is always querying about when the next novel will be released."

"I guess he makes a good living?"

"Good but not great. For him, for me, and for his publisher. Everybody wins a bit when an author is successful."

After comparing notes back at the station, Earl called the hospital to see how Declan was doing. He was no longer there. The tough Irishman had returned to his boarding house where presumably Mrs. O'Hara would manage his recovery by mothering him. *Or should I call it smothering?* Earl asked himself with a smile, thinking about Sally's report about her fandom. He was surprised the Irish wrinklie hadn't given him a deal on his board and room for the author's signatures on his novels.

Earl called the novelist. After a few questions and advice about his recuperation, Earl said, "I'm going to ask a big favor, Mr. Flaherty. Granting it would help us tremendously in the investigation."

"Getting as puzzled as I am, are you? And it's time you called me Declan. Seems like we're almost drinking mates."

Irony? Doubt? Frustration? Earl thought the voice on his mobile was edgy and challenging as well. "I know it's a big ask, but after talking to your publisher and agent, and after Sally had a nice chinwag with Mrs. O'Hara, we can't find any person who had sufficient motive to try to kill you. And someone obviously wants to do that because they waited patiently for you to leave that pub."

"I'm sorry and disappointed that you've found no joy in all those interviews, Inspector, but what can I possibly do to help with your investigation?"

"I'd like you to work with my sergeant to sort your recent notes so that we can all study them. You possibly observed something that someone didn't want you to see. You probably don't even realize it."

"Um, that's a rather large favor to ask. My research notes are always a chaotic mess."

"But you must organize them for your novel writing, correct?"

"Yes, back in London, to turn them, at least some of them, into something useful for a plot. Sometimes I have enough material for two or three novels." There was a long pause. Earl waited. "Okay, I'll do it, but only if you also grant me a favor."

Alarm bells rang in Earl's mind. He frowned. "What might that be?"

"When I'm a bit more recovered, could you allow me to observe policework in the Lake District? I've done that with the Met, but I'm sure you coppers operate differently up here."

"That might put you in more danger because, one, the shooter will see that he failed, and two, he'll fear that you're being a snout for the police because you found the incriminating material."

“I can sign something so the Penrith PD District faces no legal risk. I did that with the Met.”

Earl sighed. “I’ll consult with my DCI, but it’s okay by me, I guess. You can’t say I didn’t warn you, though.”

“Is this scene familiar to you,” Sally asked Declan.

He leaned in to see the computer’s screen better. Earl could see that the Irishman took the opportunity to admire his sergeant’s cleavage. “Looks like what I described in my notes. It generated a series of what-ifs I can later use.”

“We also have the owner’s name for that saloon corresponding to the ANPR record just before the car turned off the motorway and headed into the hamlet. Let me start the video surveillance record.” She let it run until a tall, thin man, presumably the driver, got out and went inside a different pub, the more upscale *Roadside Inn*. He later exited the pub with a young woman in tow and forced her into the back seat.

“That’s what generated my what-ifs. What if he’s a pimp out to punish a kerb-crawler from his stable? What if it’s the kidnapping of some drunk, rich girl for ransom? What if it’s the case of a Russian spy taking someone away to be tortured? All answers could be no in real life, but they might provide the basis for a good story. Especially for a hook.”

“Hook?” Earl said.

“Opening scene to grab the readers’ attention and make them ask their own questions. They’re then willing to read on to get them answered.”

“I see. Do you think any of your what-ifs might be answered with a yes?”

“Isn’t it the job of you plods to answer that? More to the point, why would that gaunt fellow target me for observing that bit of late-night action. Once in my notes, I put it out of mind until much later.”

“Only a possibility, Declan, a possible clue where we have a dearth of them. We’re canvassing the area now. This is another pub not that far from your shooting scene. Were you there?”

“Hit it before Mrs. O’Hara’s, to be honest. It’s a bit posh, and I’d heard that some local toffs take their mistresses there. Local color again, you see. I can sit and enjoy a pint and imagine what the rich and powerful blokes are talking about with their hens. I might hit three or four pubs in a night.”

Sally smiled and Earl frowned. He thought all that was a bit creepy. *Maybe writers are as bad as reporters? Or worse?*

The plate number led them to a hire-car agency. The saloon vehicle had been leased by John Smythe, a name that sounded like an alias. Neither the abductor nor the abductee matched any records on HOLMES after they ran their facial recognition program. Either the blow-ups of the stills from the video were too grainy, or the man and woman’s faces just weren’t in the police database.

All that occurred back at their station after they talked to the publican who managed the posh pub.

“He met her here,” the corpulent bloke had said. “Weren’t regulars, but upper crust like most of our guests. He bought her drinks, but they hit her fast, like. He said something about taking her home.”

The date drug? Earl had thought. That would seem to confirm an abduction. *But for what purpose? Did the abductor run an escort service? Porn podcast?* He didn't look sleazy enough to be someone in the sex trade looking for new "recruits." *Ransom?* No mispers cases had been reported.

Sally had also noted that the woman's abductor, if that was what he was, acted and looked more sophisticated than the average scrote.

"I'm going to run the program again, Guv, this time examining society pages."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Earl figured that would be a waste of time, but it wouldn't take Sally too long. In the local broadsheet, the society pages often became only one page, unlike in the big-city papers, London's in particular. He got busy querying other police departments on whether they had any similar cases. Away from the big cities, getting things up on HOLMES could take a while. In particular, they could have open mispers cases still not posted.

But Sally had success. The woman was the district MP's wife, and John Smythe was Mr. Daniel Clarke, the PA for the MP. He hovered in the background at some function, flashing a mile that looked fake, and the wife clung to the MP's arm. Was he acting alone or for his employer at that pub? Earl checked and discovered that the MP was in London at the time of the abduction, so the answer to his question was indeterminate for the time being. A trip to the MP's local residence was required.

The estate was large but not gated. It was nearer Penrith than where the shooting had occurred; the posh pub was even nearer. They pulled into and around the circular drive and parked in an area where maybe carriages had parked at the end of the 1800s; but the house had probably seen many improvements since then, some in poor taste as far as Earl was concerned. He spotted some huge AC units on one side. *Not a bad idea*, he thought. *Summers are often scorching now even as far north as the Lake District. Worse down south—another reason to retire in the Lake District!* He supposed heating upgrades had also been made, their effectiveness probability dependent on redoing a lot of insulation and caulking if not the addition of new ductwork. Old mansions were expensive to buy and maintain.

How much does it cost to run this place? Like many MPs, Sir Richard Bixby was probably out of touch with the common folk and more interested in ensuring his spot among the privileged elites. But he still needed to get the people's votes every so often!

Sally must have been having similar thoughts because she said, "I believe we're going to be visiting with the upper crust, Guv."

"Don't worry about it, lass. An MP puts his pants on just like I do. Let me handle the toff."

They walked to the foreboding front door, really two large oaken ones with centuries of varnish upon the wood. He leaned on the bell, hearing it echo within the mansion. A maid came to the door, not a butler.

He flashed his warrant card. "Inspector Earl Wilson and Sergeant Sally Hill from Penrith PD, madam. We would like to speak to MP Richard Bixby or Mr. Daniel Clarke, if you would be so kind."

She frowned, took his warrant card and examined it, and then returned it. She then looked disparagingly at Sally. "The master is in London doing the people's business. I will have to see if Mr. Clarke is here. Please wait." She slammed the door shut.

"Does she have a right to be so snooty?" Sally asked.

“She’s not comparing us to herself, lass; she just knows we aren’t in the MP’s social class. Don’t worry. Our Mr. Clarke probably doesn’t win her approval either. Servants are often snooty and also very protective of their toffs. They’re paid to be that way.”

“No wonder aristocracy’s a dying institution.”

“The aristocracy can’t die out fast enough for me. That includes that whole lot of Windsors, of course. Sorry about the old queen, though. She was the nation’s nan.”

Five minutes later, the door opened. This time it was an old butler. He barely glanced at the warrant card. “Follow me, officers.”

They saw a bit of the mansion’s interior as they wound through some dark halls, ending up at the entrance to a study filled with sunlight from a garden just outside. It contained one large desk and a much smaller one, but was obviously intended to be a meeting room as well as a quiet place to enjoy a good book. Seated at the smaller, Earl recognized Daniel Clarke, the man from the video file. He stood and walked towards them. “Have Dora bring us a tea service, James. We must treat our guests properly.”

“Yes sir.”

James left them alone with the PA, who gestured towards a semicircle of four comfortable chairs arranged around a huge fireplace. “Please have a seat.” They did. “What brings you to Bixby Manor, officers?”

Sally placed the stills taken from the video on the small table at the center of the semicircle. “We matched your image here to one in our local broadsheet. Who’s the woman, Mr. Clarke?”

“Someone who could give the honorable Mr. Bixby a lot of negative publicity. She’s Eleanor Bixby, the MP’s wife, as you probably already know. They’re going through a rough patch right now.”

“I see,” Earl said. “So you were sent to collect her at the pub and avoid the negative publicity about an inebriated wife?”

He shrugged. “I’m the PA for both the MP and his wife. He wasn’t here, so he had me act for him. That’s part of my job, Inspector.”

“Am I right in suspecting you used some GHB, ketamine, or rohypnol to ensure her cooperation?”

“Why would you ever suspect that? Eleanor and I are friends. She was drunk, but she came willingly. She probably realized taxis were scarce that time of night.”

“Doesn’t look like she came willingly to me,” Sally said.

“You’ll have to prove that, Sergeant.” Clarke stood. “I think we’re done here.”

“You forgot the tea,” Earl said. “And we’ll need to talk to Mrs. Bixby.”

“You may now assume the tea is only for me, and she’s not here either.”

“Where is she? Will she return soon? We can wait.”

“She’s also in London. When there are official galas, she usually accompanies the MP. I believe this one will be sponsored by King Charles III. It’s a fund raiser for some of his pet environmental causes, so there are some political trappings surrounding it. I’ll ring the maid who will show you out.”

“The royal brush-off,” Earl said to Sally once behind the wheel of their EV from the carpool. “I wonder if the MP also treats all his constituents in such a boorish manner.”

“Daniel Clarke is hiding something, Guv. Eleanor Bixby seemed to be drugged and wasn’t going with him willingly.”

“Agreed. But is whatever Clarke is hiding sufficient motivation for murder? That remains to be seen. We have one more person we can query.”

“Who’s that?”

“Whoever leads the MP’s security detail while he’s in London. I know a fellow who does that for the PM. He’ll surely know who’s doing it for our honorable MP Richard Bixby. Sometimes it’s all about who you know, Sally.”

“Indeed. And it’s more important to know who does the real work and not the lazy politicians. Why don’t you call your informant now?”

Earl looked at his watch. “No time like the present.”

The PM was now a member of the Labour Party, but Harry Rawlins, the head of his security detail, knew the head of Tory Bixby’s security detail. He suggested that Earl call him after hearing about the case of Declan Flaherty’s shooting.

“Sam Jenkins is a good bloke. Mention my name because he’s not likely to give you any information about Bixby otherwise. Make sure he knows you’re a copper too. He hates the media.”

Earl laughed. He’d met Harry in the Royal Navy. Both had been much younger then, eighteen-year-old lads who had no idea about what they were going to do with their lives at the time.

“Was he a navy man too?”

“Army. Some traditional Scottish regiment, if memory serves. We’re still drinking buddies even with that and working for MPs from different parties, of course. Sam went to Peel too, worked in the Met for a while, and then resigned to go into the security business. Better hours and better pay. You know the story.”

“Let me have his mobile number. I’ll give him a call.”

Earl chatted with Sam for a few minutes about their adventures at the Peel Centre, policing in general, and the security business. He then got serious. He first explained what had happened to Declan again. He then asked, “We have a few leads gleaned from the novelist’s own notes. One we’re considering relates to your MP.”

“That old toff getting his lily-white hands dirty, is he?”

Earl explained what they’d seen on the video. “We queried Clarke about it. He said she had too much to drink.”

“Could be. She’s a wild one, that woman. But maybe not, ‘cause I doubt a few drinks would shut her down. Eleanor’s about fifteen years younger than my boss, and there are rumors she’s having an affair with someone. That someone could be Clarke. Lots of opportunity for those two to get it on, I dare say.”

“But why would Clarke want to kill Flaherty?”

“Maybe there’s more going on, and Clarke thought Flaherty knew more than he did.”

Earl thought a moment. “Has your MP Bixby hired a PI to follow either Clarke or his wife?”

“Not that I know. Aye, Clarke might have thought your victim was a PI—writers can be nosy blokes too—but your question’s still relevant. I don’t know Clarke that well—he stays in your area for the most part—but it would seem that killing a PI is going a bit too far.”

“Mrs. Bixby is there with your MP. Do things seem normal between them? No obvious barneys between husband and wife?”

“Old Bixby’s barneys mostly occur with other politicians, even Tories. His life is politics. He’s lost a rag with several MPs and basically slandered the PM on the floor, arguing that crime is out of control everywhere, for example.”

“Good campaign theme, I suppose. Um, maybe that’s why the missus has someone on the side. He doesn’t have the time or energy to fulfill his duties as a husband.”

“Oh, she’s important to him for his public persona, so he coddles her. She’s a lovely ornament he can show off at state functions. They’ll both be dressed to the nines at the King’s gala, I assure you. In fact, she and the old Queen Consort get along rather well. Whether that’s a political asset for Bixby is questionable, of course. The whole royal family is mostly irrelevant now and not as popular as it once was.”

“What’s Eleanor’s background?”

“I can send you information on both the MP and his wife, all London-oriented and not that pertinent to their life in Penrith. That part’s on you. You might spot something that’s relevant to your case all the same.”

“Thanks. That might help. And, if you think of anything else, let me know. When I’m in London some time, we should throw down a few pints with Harry.”

“Sounds like a plan. Good luck on the case.”

Neither Sam’s information nor the local information readily available on the area’s MP and his wife was enlightening, though. While Earl went on to other items they’d noticed in Declan’s notes, Sally dug deeper into the local records.

She went to Earl’s office to bring something to his attention. She waited patiently until he got off the phone.

“Well, that kills two other leads,” he said. “We might have to return to have a chat with that publican to see if he can remember how many drinks Eleanor actually had. I’m still betting Clarke spiked them.”

“Maybe. I found something interesting. Richard and Eleanor got married only ten years ago. Her maiden name was Clarke. She’s Daniel’s first cousin. I suspect she got him the PA post.”

“And, unless he’s committing incest, he’s not her lover. We need to find out if she really has one, and, if she does, who he is. Our friendly publican at *The Roadside Inn* might be able to answer both questions.”

“How so?”

“Daniel met her at the pub. Suppose she was a regular there and was waiting for someone else?”

“You have a devious mind. Clarke could have gone there to prevent anything embarrassing to occur for his boss. Or maybe she was already there with her lover?”

“So her cousin could have been playing the role of a PI. If we go back earlier into that video record, we might find her real lover.”

“He might have been waiting for her. The publican could tell us that. If we get any sort of description, we can then find him in the video record, whenever he arrived. Let’s go.”

“I was going to do lunch, Guv.”

“In our canteen?” She nodded. “Come on. I’ll wager that the pub has a much superior menu, and our business will motivate the publican to be more forthcoming. My treat.”

The pub was busy with its early upper-crust lunch crowd, but not that busy. The publican sat at the table with them after bringing them some promising meat pies and two ales.

"Aye, that woman was here waiting quite a while. Then this one bloke shows up, and I thought he was going to have a go at her right there. Marra, there was a lot of heavy panting, hugs, and kisses. But they sat, and they ordered drinks. The bloke gets a call on his moby and dashes out, leaving her upset. Half hour later, the second bloke makes an appearance, the one who took her away. They had some angry words, and then the drinks hit her, I guess."

"Did the second man doctor her drinks?" Earl asked.

The publican frowned and shrugged. "Wasn't paying a lot of attention, Inspector. Nights are a lot busier. Every toff around the area loves this place. I figured the first bloke was the new boyfriend, and the second the jealous ex. But what do I know? I stay out of those things as much as possible unless someone gets rowdy." He flexed his biceps. "Then I can even step in myself."

"Can you describe the first bloke?"

The publican stole a chip, scrunched up his face, and pondered the question. "Saw more of him than the second, I 'spose, but I keep the lights dim at night. Actually, come to think of it, he left via the backdoor, the exit nearest the car park. Seemed in a hurry, like. Anyways, I saw his mug clearly then." He ran a finger from between his right eyebrow and right ear, down the cheek, and to the chin. "Old pale scar there on the side of his face. Bushy eyebrows he had, hair thinning a bit, big ears, wide eyes. Didn't note the color."

"That's a good description, sir, especially the scar," Sally said. "How tall was he?"

"About your height, lass. Wiry and muscular too. Dressed in a checkered jacket with decorative patches on the elbows. Could have been a schoolmaster, I suppose. Doubt he was giving the lady lessons in maths, though. More likely reproductive biology."

Sally smiled and glanced at Earl; he nodded. Declan Flaherty had been dressed in a similar casual sportscoat. Was the novelist lying to them? Was he Eleanor's secret lover? Earl had wondered why the London author had come all the way to the Lake District to find a setting for a new novel.

Back in their pool car, he said to Sally, "Either we have a case of mistaken identity, lass, or Declan is Eleanor's squeeze on the side."

"Declan has no scar," she said. Both knew that a bit of actor's makeup could hide that, though. But wouldn't that have been removed at the hospital? "And if your second guess were true, he's been misleading us all this time. I can't believe that."

"One never knows, lass. In any case, I'd bet Clarke took his cousin home and then went back to find the first feller. He found Declan instead, assuming they're not one and the same."

"We need to find that first feller then," Sally said with a smile, "assuming he's not Declan. Any ideas about where to start?"

"Aye. We'll get our police artist to take the publican's description and turn it into something we can circulate. He can work with the publican. Probably ideal if he goes to the pub. Ale sometimes goes a long way to inspire an artist." He chuckled.

"If the publican says the result is a good likeness, I'd suggest running it through facial recognition first."

"You can do that with a drawing?"

"We can try."

"Sixty-seven percent correlation? What does that mean?"

Sally had just told him about the results produced by the facial recognition software. “A facial image can correlate with several faces in HOLMES. All other ‘hits’ were twenty-percent and lower. Only Michael Greene gave sixty-seven percent, a high probability that he and the first man who met with Eleanor at the pub are one and the same person.”

“We’ll have to go over the security videos again.”

“He’s not in them, but there are several blind spots for both the street cameras and the ones in the car park. We got lucky with Clarke.”

“Maybe because he’s not a wanker like ‘Little Mike’ Greene, who’s probably a lot more experienced at not appearing on surveillance cameras.”

“Seems like you know the gentleman.”

“Nae gentleman, lass. He’s a wanker whose fingers are far from clean. Into all kinds of trafficking, from smuggled goods to drugs and human beings. Maybe Eleanor suffers from the ‘highwayman syndrome.’”

“What’s that?”

“In the old days there weren’t so many bodice rippers.” He saw her expression. “Romantic or erotic novels written for lonely women. The poor dears dreamed about being abducted by some flamboyant highwayman, a wanker who robbed from the rich daring to ride on the king’s highways.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I can’t explain the popularity of those novels today otherwise. That trashy *Fifty Shades* shite sold millions. I bet old Declan also throws enough romance into his novels to appeal to those readers. Every lonely housewife watches those serials on telly for the same reasons. The average bloke buried in his work expects his wife to take care of homelife—children, breakfasts and dinners, buying clothes, and so forth. And don’t look at me that way. I’m not married.”

“And I am. You’re full of it, and that explanation was sexist as hell.”

“Can you look at Little Mike and tell me he’s not a more interesting bloke than Richard Bixby, who looks like some embalmed toff from the Victorian age with those muttonchops?”

She smiled. “Okay, you have a point. But Declan Flaherty has that flair too.”

“Confess that to your husband, lass, just to see how he reacts.”

She turned red. “I think we’d better go visit Mr. Greene before I commit inspectorcide.”

They found “Little Mike” Greene in a warehouse he owned in the Penrith suburbs. There was an office up a flight of stairs that looked over the warehouse’s main floor. A burly bodyguard led Sally and Earl to that office.

Greene waved at the paperwork cluttering his old desk. “As you can observe, I’m a busy man. Say what you plods gotta say and then leave me alone.”

That was a comment for the two of them, but his eyes had been on Sally. Earl smiled. *This wanker thinks he’s a ladies’ man.*

“Were you in *The Roadside Inn* two nights ago with Eleanor Bixby?”

“You must know I was or you wouldn’t ask. So what?”

“Why did you decide to leave so fast? From the backdoor, to be precise.”

“Eddie, my aide who brought you up here, called to warn me that her feckin’ cousin was on his way and might cause trouble. I like to avoid negative publicity.”

“It would seem that our MP might be of like mind because you’re his wife’s lover, right?”

Greene shrugged. "That old toff doesn't know how to treat a woman right. That's not unusual, Inspector."

"So you scarpered, afraid that Daniel Clarke was arriving to teach you a lesson?"

Green bristled. "I'm not afraid of her cousin. He's a feckin' prat. Eddie could break him into two pieces, but I could handle the pillock as well. I've been a scrappy fighter since I was a lad in Manchester."

"Still have connections there, do you? Which gang?"

"My business interests aren't why you're here. So, what's the deal with Daniel? He's a nobody."

"Did Eleanor know you were heading to *The Pink Hippo* when you left her?"

"Sure. Told her I was going there to avoid a barney with her cousin, and if she got free of him, I'd be there. Why?"

"How long were you there?"

"Arrived there straight like." He thought a moment. "Left *The Hippo* just before midnight. You do the math."

Earl glanced at Sally; she nodded. If true, that was before Declan arrived.

"Any proof of that?"

Greene shrugged. "What part? That I was at *The Hippo* or at *The Roadside*?"

"The first. We know you were at *The Roadside* with Eleanor."

"Right. Let me think. Didn't see the publican at *The Hippo*. Waitress served me. Threw down two pints quick like, got bored waiting and left. She was busy then, so I left my money on the table. *The Hippo* is a place where no one would dare steal that, my being a well-known customer there."

Meaning everyone there knew you're a violent yob not to be trifled with, thought Earl.

"Do you remember the name of the waitress?"

"'Twas a new bird. Never saw her before. Nice tits, though, like you, sergeant."

Sally turned red.

"I insist that you respect my sergeant, Little Mike. I can nick you for forty-eight hours just on principle, you know."

"You can try."

"Oh, not me personally. I can have a SCO19 come and take you and all your so-called aides in to be guests in our nick. From what I've seen of their numbers here, those cells might become a little crowded, but I wouldn't expect you to worry too much about comfort considering what a tip this warehouse is." He grinned. "I'd love you to call my bluff. It would give us a chance to open up some of those crates on your warehouse floor to see what's in them. So, don't tempt me."

Greene shrugged. "I only mentioned her most important feature so you can find her to confirm when I left *The Hippo*."

Earl left it at that. Despite the wanker's reputation, Earl thought he was telling the truth. His attention returned to Daniel Clarke.

"Have you actually seen the MP's wife recently?" Earl asked his new contact Sam Jenkins, the MP Bixby's head of security. Sally and Earl had returned to the station from the warehouse, and he was acting on a hunch that had occurred to him while talking to Little Mike.

"Curious that you called, Earl. We've been informed that Lady Eleanor won't be attending the King's gala after all. She's indisposed and recovering at their Penrith estate."

“Who told you that?”

“Daniel Clarke, the MP’s PA.”

“What made you think she’d be accompanying the MP originally?”

“Clarke again. He said she’d be in London. And frankly, that’s what we expected. The old toff likes to show her off. He reminds me of that ex-American president who was always bragging about his wives and sexual prowess.”

“Only one wife in Bixby’s case; Sir Richard is a lot more faithful, it seems.” *And maybe complicit in trying to keep Eleanor away from Little Mike? What a scandal that would be!* Earl could see the headlines in the London rags. “Thanks, Sam.”

Earl turned to Sally after hanging up. “My hunch was spot on. I’m willing to bet Daniel is holding cousin Eleanor under duress somewhere in that large house.”

“What can we do about it?”

“A bit of subterfuge is required, my lass. I’ll get old Judge Stevens to issue a warrant so we can search for the gun used to shoot Declan. We have enough evidence to justify that. If we just happen to find Eleanor during that search, all the better, don’t you think?”

Her smile was her only answer to that question.

This time the butler showed them into the study, but they had to wait for Daniel Clarke. The maid brought them tea service. Sally served as mother, and that gave them enough time to hone their attack plan over a cuppa and some little biscuits.

When Daniel appeared, he said, “I can’t say I’m happy to see you again, Inspector. Did you just return here for your tea?”

“No, sir.” Earl stood and handed Daniel three sheets of paper. “A warrant to search the premises, Mr. Clarke. We have ample evidence to show you tried to kill Declan Flaherty, so we expect to find the weapon you used here, namely the one licensed to you. Forensics will be able to match it to the one used at the shooting.”

Daniel smiled, went behind his little desk, and sat. “Are you still referring to my helping my tippling cousin get home?”

“Indeed. And on our first visit, you neglected to mention that Lady Eleanor is indeed your cousin. A bit of nepotism has occurred in this old toff’s household, it seems. That’s how you got your job here, right?”

He frowned. “I was over-qualified, Inspector, but I’ll confess that Eleanor’s recommendation probably helped. Sir Richard would do anything to please her.”

“Even overlooking a young lover because Bixby couldn’t do his husbandly duties? Little Mike probably manages that in spades.”

“How dare you slander my cousin!”

“Stuff it, Daniel.” Earl turned to Sally. “Do you agree, Sergeant Hill, that yon wanker doth protest too much?”

She smiled and winked at Daniel. “I’d think a neglected spouse looking for some excitement in her boring life isn’t as egregious a crime as attempted murder. What’s your opinion, Mr. Clarke?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Earl took over the interview again. “You followed Little Mike to *The Pink Hippo*, but he’d already left by the time you arrived. The man you shot, Declan Flaherty, looked like Little Mike, especially in the dark, and you mistakenly shot Declan. You’re not a professional assassin, Daniel. You should have confirmed that your target was indeed Little Mike, and you should have

policed your fag butts and shells after the shooting. I expect we'll find the gun that fired them in this house. Hence the warrant."

Daniel reached into a desk drawer, pulled out a gun, and pointed it at them. "I think this is the gun you might be looking for. Yes, I made a mistake, but it's not what you think. I knew Mr. Flaherty; I'm a fan of his novels, in fact. So is Eleanor. At the end of each one, he publishes notes describing how his observations in the real world motivate him to pen the novel. He saw me hustle Eleanor into the hire-car." Daniel waved the gun. "He was the target, you fools! I don't give a damn whether Little Mike attends to Eleanor's sexual needs. He helps her cope with a loveless marriage where she's only the old toff's ornamental bauble." The smile he flashed towards them was brimming with insanity. "But you won't be able to pass that information to the CPS now, will you?"

"The Crown Prosecution Service might wonder about the warrant," Sally said.

"Eleanor and I will be somewhere in Europe by that time. We take care of each other."

Earl was thinking about how to distract the madman—his gun hand was shaking now, probably more in anger—when the study's door was flung open. Eleanor Bixby entered. "You fool! James told me who your visitors are. What the hell are you doing? You're ruining everything!" She was dressed in a silk robe that did little to hide her curves. She pointed an elegant finger at Daniel. "It wasn't enough that I got you the PA position here. One that you obviously didn't deserve!"

"Madam, please," Earl said, "let us handle this situation."

But the warning came too late. Daniel turned the gun on his cousin and shot her.

That's when Earl launched himself at Daniel just as he turned the gun on himself.

"You're not going to avoid a trial in Crown Court, you bastard!"

Both Daniel Clarke and Eleanor Biggs nee Clarke received prison sentences; his was longer. She would get some special treatment because she was paralyzed from the waist down, and she hadn't tried to kill Declan Flaherty, after all. Earl was surprised when Flaherty showed up in his office six months later. He accepted the proffered coffee and smiled at Sally.

"I would have thought you'd never return to the Lake District, Mr. Flaherty," Earl said, "considering all that happened."

"Initially, my thoughts led in that direction. But what a story! Daniel got the scandal he wanted to avoid, and Eleanor is paying for her betrayal of the old MP."

"Who had to resign," Sally said, "even though he was a victim like you."

"But not shot at. I just came from visiting Eleanor in prison. She filled in a lot of blanks about what occurred. You two did some good policing, I dare say. I never got to ride around with you either."

"Don't tell me you're going to use what happened in a novel?" Earl said.

"Probably not. I was curious about getting Eleanor's side of the story, though. I don't give a damn about the MP. In a sense, he caused the whole situation. When will old men learn that they can't prove their virility to voters by acquiring a young bride? That usually leads to problems. All that is a theme in another novel already, so I'd have to change things a lot to use Eleanor's story. What I've learned is that I should be careful with the end notes in my novels. I know fans like them, but they led Daniel Clarke to jump to conclusions."

"I'm sure your readers won't mind," Sally said, batting her eyelashes and smiling.

The Recruit

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DI Earl Wilson was already walking around the crime scene leaving DS Sally Hill to other chores. She'd be taking notes on her moby too, stylus in hand, mostly about the obvious; his sergeant was OCD about crime details. He'd be looking for things that weren't so obvious. They were a good team.

"Seven combatants dead, lass. Looks like Fallujah or some other killing fields in the Middle East, not a tranquil scene here in our Lake District."

"Um, I recognize this bloke, Guv," Sally said, bending over one of the bodies to study the face, its features distorted by the rictus of death. "Ed Chance, muscle for the Crystal Boys. Clean shot to the heart. The man who shot him had a good eye."

"Guess Chance didn't have a chance. Turf war between two gangs? Who's invading whose patch?"

"Being as near to each other as they are, I'd think they'd joined forces and were pursuing someone."

"Going after some yob who betrayed both gangs? Isn't greed just wonderful?" He'd already moved far away from the inglorious seven. Across a pretty lea and about a soccer field away, he halted and called out, "Blood traces here. Whoever they were after stood his ground here and blew them all away. Weird." Earl picked up one shell, figuring the SOCOs wouldn't miss it. "Automatic weapon. Maybe a Chinese copy of an Uzi? We see more of those than the Americans' AR-style rifles. They keep those to themselves to use in their school shootings, you know. Here none of them are legal outside our ARUs or military units, of course. And I don't think our Rambo wasted much of his ammo, shooting as well as he did. I count only ten shell casings. So maybe a semi-automatic?" His gaze became more distant as he surveyed the abandoned farm. "If this place were drier and had a bit of sagebrush, I'd compare the bloke who did this to one of the Earps at OK Corral."

He spotted the pathologist and SOCOs' vans moving up the track that led to the farm's main buildings. They would soon turn off and get as close as they could to the killing field. He pointed. "We'll let Harry and his science lads and Doc Simpson do their bit here. Let's take a look down there, staying one step ahead of them." He pointed to the main buildings nestled in a dale. "Our morning exercise, lass."

Once there and after donning their booties and gloves, they found some interesting evidence in the old farmhouse. An otherwise empty sitting room contained only one chair. Ropes that had been sliced through still hung from it. There were some blood traces on the old rug around the chair, new stains to add a splash of color to the old ones.

"Someone was being held here."

"And maybe tortured?" Sally said.

"But he managed to escape. Our lone shooter with the Uzi copy?"

She walked around the rest of the sitting room and visited the outside hall while he went into the kitchen that featured a relic from the past, a handsome wood stove. In the back corner by the door, he found something more interesting than the stove.

"Lass, back here," he called out. When she appeared, he pointed to the corpse. "Might be who had the task of guarding the prisoner?" A penknife was sticking in the man's neck, its

damage to his carotid leaving the man's head resting in a large pool of blood. Using his many years of experience, Earl put all the data together to make a tentative theory. "Crystal Boys and/or the other gang holds the bloke for whatever reason, he escapes and kills his one guard while they're off somewhere else, and does a runner, taking the guard's weapon along as a souvenir. The gang members return and chase him, he stops and turns, and blows them away."

"Good enough theory for now. But how does the other gang come to be here?"

Earl shrugged. "They were both after the yob. Maybe he was a snout working against both of them? Not mine, that's for sure, but maybe one of those associated with the drugs lads at Penrith HQ. The two gangs were either in business together or temporarily joined forces to take him down, but everyone forgot he had the guard's weapon."

"Harry and his SOCOs might be able to refine your theory."

"Or show it's completely wrong. In any case, seven gang members, no, eight, counting this yobbie here, are dead. That's a miracle. Eight against one. And don't forget the bloke was able to cut through those ropes binding him. He's good. Limber too."

"Admiring him, are you?"

Earl shrugged again. "Enjoying it, to be honest. Eight gang members we no longer have to worry about on our patch, I dare say. And maybe a message to scrotes elsewhere? Is Ed Chance from Manchester?"

"One of their local reps, if memory serves."

Earl nodded—his sergeant had a good memory too, so he believed her—and pulled out his mobile. He told Harry, the lead SOCO, that his team would need to go over the farm buildings after finishing their work at the shooting site up the hill.

"Now the question becomes: Why were all these lovely maggots who live in England's underbelly all here at this old farm?"

They were outside now. She pointed. "There's a newer building higher up on the hill, Guv." He squinted. The lead SOCO was still on the line. That building was nearer the SOCOs, so Earl suggested to Harry that they hit that one first.

"Katie thinks it has surveillance cameras," the SOCO said, referring to one of his team members.

"It might be why all these dead thugs were here," Earl said. "I'm willing to bet the gangs were using the abandoned farm for a manufacturing plant. Fine-tooth comb and all that, lad, and some surveillance video would be much appreciated."

Hours later, Sally and Earl were examining their third surveillance video from the cameras positioned around the newer building on the hill that they now knew had been a lab to make illegal or controlled pills. A lot of product was still there, hence the videocams. Number three was wide-angle and provided a panoramic view of the shootout in the vale below.

It was like watching an action film on the telly. A young man dashed out of the old farmhouse in a limping and loping run. Gang members from the property's barn poured out in pursuit. Earl thought the young bloke might be between twenty- and thirty-years-old. The seven thugs gained on him because of his limping gait. Why didn't they just shoot him? Suddenly their quarry turned and sprayed them all with bullets. He then disappeared around and behind the same hill where the drugs lab sat on top, going out of all the cameras's ranges.

"Wow!" said Earl.

"I agree!"

They'd been so engrossed in the action that they hadn't realized that a tall stranger now filled Earl's office doorframe.

Earl stood to face the stranger. "Who the hell are you? How'd you get into our CID? And how long have you been watching?"

The stranger smiled. "Rick Barnes, MI5 agent, at your service." He offered a handshake to Earl, who ignored the offer as if the hand belonged to a zombie who looked like Putin risen from the grave. The stranger then showed his credentials. "Duty sergeant waved me through and no one else tried to stop me. And I saw most of what you saw. It has increased my appreciation for that lad's skill."

"Okay. Just what do you want? Why is MI5 even interested in this case?"

Rick plopped into the other guest chair without being invited and pointed at Sally's laptop. "I'd like to watch that video with you again." Sally looked at Earl; he nodded. At one point just as the lad turned to face his pursuers, the agent said, "Stop it there." The video now showed a still image, a good shot of the lad's face after Sally enlarged. "Meet Simon Edgewood. That's not his real name, though. It's a new one given to him because he's in witness protection. Or was. I can't say he was a willing participant, but we had our reasons for doing that, and I'll have to say we failed to protect him like we should have."

Rick told the coppers that Simon had testified against some gang leaders in Northumberland, Newcastle-on-Tyne's area. Sally nodded knowingly; she probably recognized the names of some of the particulars. In the courtroom, they'd vowed to get even and put a price on Simon's head from jail. The authorities had given him a new life in the Lake District, but somehow the local gangs in Earl's patch had learned who he was.

"Was he maybe back in the business?"

"I doubt it. He's been here almost ten years. He testified in Newcastle when he was only fifteen. Nice lad who went astray early. Same old story. Abusive, tippler father; druggie mum. Poor, no future, no education, although he's intelligent enough and after all that, self-taught. And I'm here for more reasons than trying to protect one of the Crown's star witnesses. NCA's as well as MI5's, to be precise. We want to recruit him."

"What?" Earl glanced at Sally. She shrugged, so Earl returned his attention to the smiling agent. "He's obviously a killer! Why would MI5 want a job like that working for them?"

"He's intelligent, resourceful, and skilled, all good qualities for a field agent. He's also been clean since those Newcastle trials. He might have stayed clean except for that bounty. The two gangs here probably thought it could win them some favors with the syndicate in Newcastle, I suppose. NCA tells me they're trying to link up with the east-coast fellows to have one vast network covering the northern counties."

"I'd guess he's a dead man walking now," Earl said, somewhat mollified. Had he jumped to conclusions? "Damaged goods, I dare say."

"So, you would just toss him to the wolves, Earl?" Sally asked him.

He glanced at his sergeant. She called him Earl only when she was unhappy with his behavior. "Obviously not my call. And maybe not our case?" The question was directed at the agent.

"Your case is basically closed, but I would like to ask for your help in finding Simon. He won't do our program any good if he's dead."

"Your program?"

"I don't get it," Sally said, adding to Earl's question with a comment. "Does MI5 or NCA make a habit of recruiting troubled young people? How could they be reliable agents?"

"That's exactly what we do. I head the program."

"Is it successful?" Earl said.

"Better than I ever hoped for. So far we have about a thirty percent success rate. As you guessed, Sergeant, it's a combined program with NCA. After three years intensive training, the young recruits choose the agency they prefer to work for."

"Isn't something lost by their not coming up through the ranks?" Earl said. He had a low opinion of those police officers who used a similar program that took university graduates and started them out as detective constables; they lacked the street and community experience that uniformed PCs acquired on the job.

"They're on probation for another three years as well, working with a seasoned agent."

"No disastrous failures?"

"Less than five percent recidivism. The others just prefer to live ordinary lives, which we're okay with."

"What about mental and physical screenings?" Sally said.

"They're periodic throughout the training and probationary periods."

"Are MI5 and NCA that desperate for personnel?" Earl said.

"Yes. We had a lot more than normal attrition because of Covid. Also, seasoned agents are retiring early because, as you two probably know well, policing is a thankless task that few in the public appreciate or understand, and the politicians are always looking to cut our budgets. Our funding as a special program is more secure, and will continue to be as long as our success rate continues." He stretched his legs and crossed them. Earl now expected yet another sales pitch. "Moreover, the UK is becoming a lot more diverse, and our police and other authorities should reflect that changing diversity. My program offers a chance to disadvantaged groups to go into law enforcement, which is a steady job with benefits. You must know how blacks and Asians have had a tough time getting a good-paying job and owning a house in ye olde merry England. There was that banking scandal about mortgages not that long ago."

"This Simon is white," Sally said, pointing at the screen.

"He's a poor Geordie boy who had no chance early in life. He matured in the witness program and became a model citizen until those two gangs discovered his identity and went after the bounty. That was more to win points with that Newcastle syndicate, I believe."

"So, did he go over to the dark side now?" Earl said. "He left eight bodies behind at that farm. That's a fact."

"I don't know, but from the video, we could consider all that happened there self-defense. There's no way to tell if that shooting exhibition was that of a cold-blooded killer or a young lad just trying to survive."

"I don't know either," Earl echoed. "So, I guess we should talk to him and find out?"

"Yes. Without giving the rest of the gangs' members a clue to his whereabouts."

The police officers' investigation, with MI5's Rick Barnes as observer, now became a manhunt for Simon Edgewood. It would become a strange one because on face value the person they were looking for had done nothing wrong beyond defending himself, if the MI5 agent was to be believed.

Of course, Rick's program resisted any investigation into Simon's personal life in the Lake District. Earl wanted to rid himself of that constraint.

“How can we find him if we know nothing about his stay here in the area?” he said to Rick. “My God, man, we already know he was in the witness protection program. He’s been exposed!”

“We have to protect those who are involved in his new life here.”

Earl handed his handcuffs to Rick and held out his arms. “Put them on me then. I can’t help you find him. You’ve made that an impossible mission.”

Rick handed them back. “Okay, I see your point. But how do we then keep everything about who Simon really is quiet?”

“Our police investigations are always made in secret except for the meddling media. Sometimes even people we interview play snouts and blather to a reporter if only to see their name in print in the pages of Penrith’s local broadsheet. And if we tell them they could be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act, which MI5 and NCA might feel inclined to do, they’ll just stop talking, and our investigation will fizzle.”

Rick sighed. “We’ll have to take it case by case with those who know Simon. I don’t like threatening anyone, but I reserve the right to veto any interview. His new life here will mostly include people who know nothing about his previous one. Let’s keep it that way.”

Earl smiled at his small victory. “In that case, we’ll tell everyone he’s a missing person we’re worried about and looking for because we fear he’s in danger?”

Rick nodded but had a worrisome rejoinder. “Some leaders of those gangs will know that’s not true.”

“But they won’t want his past to become public either. They want new business deals with that Newcastle syndicate.” Sally glanced from one man to the other, who she probably likened to farmyard roosters, one old bird and a challenging young one, facing off. “And maybe a bit of revenge as well as bounty?”

“Yes, let’s assume they’ll keep quiet,” Rick said. “Their losses have to be an embarrassment. Let’s just focus on finding him as stealthily as possible.”

Earl nodded. “How about getting us started? You must know something about Simon’s life here because you claimed he turned himself around.”

Rick perched on the corner of Earl’s desk, looking more relaxed now. “He works at an auto repair shop and leases a bedsit above it. He has a girlfriend, a nice young woman from a hardworking but poor family. That’s about all I know. The girlfriend or garage owner might know more.”

“Thanks,” Earl said. “Now, was that so painful?”

“Yes. I want to protect the young lad. And those people.”

“So do we,” Sally said, “The best way to do that is to find him. He might be running like a scared rabbit right now.”

“And hopefully still around, not gone to Ireland or some other place overseas,” Earl said.

“We’re watching Penrith, Liverpool, Bristol, and the southern ports. And foreign travel is difficult outside the UK now without proper documentation thanks to Brexit.”

“The lad can steal that or get fake papers. You’d better check airports too. And I’m not sure you need any documentation to take a ferry to Ireland.”

Rick only nodded.

They kept the investigation focused. Normally for a major case, Earl would get help from other stations in the Penrith Police District. His DCI agreed with the MI5 agent, though, so Earl and Sally had to make do with three of their station’s DCs along with a SOCO unit if needed.

That was why Sally showed up alone to talk with Kathy Kilborn, Simon's girlfriend who worked at a gift shop in a village near their substation. After the usual introductions, Kathy invited the DS to a storeroom in the shop's rear to get away from the worried looks of the storeowner who'd already told Sally that she loved Kathy as if she were her own daughter.

"She means well, Sergeant Hill, and she's very nice to me, always saying that I should marry Simon."

Sally nodded. "When did you last see him?" Answer: The day before the shooting. "The repair shop's owner said Simon had decided to work late on some toff's car."

"Yes, I think the car's owner had promised him a nice bonus to finish the repairs ahead of schedule. Did the repair shop's owner say anything else?"

Sally almost felt Kathy was running the interrogation. "He said Simon closed up things like he always does."

Kathy nodded. "He often works late because he lives right above the shop. He says we can't get married until we can manage a flat somewhere."

"Did you try calling his mobile?"

"He doesn't have one. He uses the phone in the repair shop, or my moby when he's with me. My parents pay for mine as part of a family plan."

Sally's next question danced around the truth. She hadn't provided the young girl with details about what had occurred at the farm. "Do you know if Simon has any enemies?"

"Heavens no! Even strangers like him, but, to be honest, he doesn't have many friends. Me, my parents, his boss, my boss—that's about it. He's from down south. Cardiff area, I think. No family, though."

"No violent pub barneys or drinking or drugs problems? Other problems with the law?" Sally had already checked HOLMES, the police database. A negative shake of the head from Kathy confirmed the lack of a record on that, but the last question had also been a test to see if she knew about his past in Northumberland that had been erased when Simon went into witness protection.

"He's a saint. I fell for him the day he came in here to buy his boss a pipe for his birthday." She smiled. "My Pops smokes one, so I could make a few good recommendations. He didn't want to go into Penrith because he doesn't have a car."

She's quite smitten, thought Sally. "Has he met your parents?" The answer to that could indicate how serious the relationship really was.

"Two dinners. Pops was impressed, and Mum, who's so protective of me and my little sister, told me he was a keeper."

Would they still feel that way if they saw that video? "We might want to talk to your parents. Would that be possible?"

"I suppose. I don't want them to think he's in trouble with the law, though."

"We'll be clear about that and just say he's missing, which he is, and we're worried about him."

"They will be too. So will my boss when I tell her why you're here."

"That's all you can tell them for now. We'll keep you informed."

Sally didn't want the worried young woman to know anything more. She was a complete innocent.

Earl had sent some SOCOs to the bedsit above the repair shop after his first visit there. Now, after talking some more to Tim Dalton, Simon's boss—he'd given the SOCOs a copy of the key—Earl climbed the stairs and stuck his head in the open door.

He saw that most of the SOCOs were still back at the farm. The newer building on the hill that had been confirmed to be a drugs lab had a lot to inspect. Earl had informed the drugs unit but refrained from mentioning Simon's history or the connection of the case to MI5 and NCA. That unit would be busy enough tracing that lab back to the two gangs because the ones on site hadn't survived.

Harry, the SOCOs' leader, was in Simon's bedsit, though, with one of his minions.

"Anything of note yet?" he said to the lead SOCO who waddled up to him looking like a NASA astronaut on a Mars mission. With the Yanks' *Artemis* mission successes, one had to wonder when the one establishing a base on the moon might occur. Or would that jerk Elon Musk be successful with his own plans? Or the Chinese who still seemed to be chomping at the bit even though their economy was in a shambles now, something they'd caused themselves, unlike what the West had done to Russia's.

"Only that there seems to be a woman's touch in play. Very neat and orderly. Two sets of fingerprints. Not much of anything else."

"Easier to have a few trysts here with his girlfriend, I suppose, than at her parents' house."

"There's a box of condoms. Is her name Kathy Kilborn?" Earl nodded. "That's on several receipts we found in a bureau drawer. For the condoms and some takeaway, although there's no rubbish corresponding to the latter. Clean place for a bachelor, I dare say."

"A serious relationship then. Nothing wrong with that as long as the lad isn't being abusive with the lass. No sign of drugs, weapons, or ammo?"

The SOCO waved a hand at the bedsit. "It seems there's not enough space here to hide even that penknife from the farm. We'll keep looking, though."

At that moment, Earl received a message. He checked his mobile and read it. Sally was meeting him at the parents' house.

Kathy's father was a handyman who worked in the area with the parents' home as his base; her mother was a seamstress who worked in the house. Sally could understand how Kathy had such a good disposition and seemed so nice because both parents were like that. She could see her Guv liked them too.

"Simon's a good bloke," Kevin Kilborn told them. "Fixed my truck for free, the lad did. Helped me load it for my next day's work too, when he was here for dinner. Treats Kathy right too, he does."

"Says we're the family he never had," Martha Kilborn said with a smile.

"Marra, that lad has good son-in-law potential." The father said that to Earl but flashed a wink at Sally afterward.

"Did he ever talk about his family?" Earl said, wondering if Simon had divulged anything about his troubles in Northumberland.

"Seems like he'd been in the foster system in Wales," Kevin said. "Reading between the lines, as it were. That's always tough. Young ones always do better in a loving family, even if it's a poor one like ours." He thought a moment, but Earl had learned patience. The man shook his head. "Can't think of anything specific. Kept himself to himself a lot, so the missus and I think he'd just as soon forget about his early years."

No surprise, thought Sally. She glanced at Earl to see if he wanted her to jump in. He nodded. "Do you think he'd be able to support your daughter?"

"Handy with his hands and tools, he is," Kevin said. "And he could help me a lot when he has time off at the repair shop, though I wouldn't be surprised if his boss gives him more duties there as well. He already closes up a lot. He's a good worker, sergeant. So my answer is yes." Martha nodded.

"Do you have any idea where we might find him?" Sally said.

Kevin glanced at this wife; she shook her head. "We're worried. That repair shop's in a seedy area. We're afraid something has happened to that young man. He's never disappeared before."

"Couldn't he just have taken some time off? Maybe he felt trapped in his relationship with Kathy?"

"Heavens no! They were already engaged in a sense," Martha said. "But he couldn't yet afford a ring. That's why she invited him to dinner. He has plans, that young man. They revolve around Kathy, but he has ambition. Wants to open his own repair shop. Smart as a whip, he is. Not school smart, but practical like."

"Always knew what to do," Kevin said. "Caught on to installing quarter-round right off, he did, just by watching me."

"Excuse me?" Sally saw Earl smile.

"That's tricky when going around corners," Earl said.

"Aye, you have to mitre it just right," Kevin said. He sighed. "My old knees aren't so good anymore, so he scooted along the floor and finished in a flash a task I had."

"I gather those plans included marrying your daughter and staying in the area?" Earl said.

"Told us that," Martha said. "We believed him. He wouldn't just do a runner, not that lad."

"Do you know about any pub brawls or other incidents? Did anyone have it in for him?"

Sally saw that Earl was dancing around the truth too.

"I don't even think he drank all that much," Kevin said. "We'd each do a pint at times, but that was about it. Not typical, I dare say—young lads these days like their drink too much—but I figured that maybe one or both of his birth parents could have been sots, and he hadn't liked that. In any case, everyone he met seemed to like him. At least, that's what Kathy has told us. She saw more of how he related to people, of course." Kevin cleared his throat and Martha nodded. "He even had patience with toffs and their rich men's cars at the repair shop. They can be..." He searched for the right words. "Rather demanding, let's say. I see that in my own work as well. Bloke has to have patience when dealing with the rich snobs who think they're better than common folk."

The SOCOs found the gun. They'd spotted a loose ceiling tile above the bedsit's counter and sink. Simon had expertly broken down the Chinese Uzi-copy and stashed it there.

Did that mean that Simon had done a runner despite what Kathy's parents had said? Earl wouldn't blame him if he had. Witness protection had failed to protect him. He was probably only alive because the two local gangs weren't sure whether the Newcastle syndicate wanted him dead or alive. But after Simon had killed eight gang members, they now probably wanted him dead no matter what that Newcastle gang wanted.

“Someone must know where he is if he stayed in the area, Guv,” Sally said. “He can’t be that familiar with the Lake District. There are places I don’t even know about, and I’ve been here a while. But how could he find them on his own?”

“Aye, there be plenty of places out among our wonderful natural treasures. A fishing cabin on some secluded lake, a cave in the mountains. Who knows?”

“But he wouldn’t know about any of those, would he? He had no time for tourism. He was working 24/7, it seems.”

Earl nodded. “I see your point.” He thought a moment. “There are two blokes who seem to have earned Simon’s trust, Tim Dalton, his boss at the repair shop, and Kevin Kilborn, Kathy’s father. He’s worked with both of them. Working men can become close mates.”

“Over pints at the pub,” Sally said with a smile. “As far as we know, Simon didn’t frequent them.”

“Um, no money, no time. But he’s still close to those chappies. Let’s visit Dalton first and then Kilborn, if only for lack of better ideas. The spooks at MI5 are depending on us.”

Sally saw him grimace as he said the latter. Her Guv didn’t like either MI5 or NCA. She was more ambivalent and liked Rick Barnes well enough.

They found Tim Dalton hard at work on a van. He took a break to have a mash with them. They got no joy from him about where Simon might be hiding, but the mash came with biscuits that were good.

“Missus baked them just last night,” the big man had said, patting his large belly.

They moved on to find Kilborn in a similar situation. He dusted spackling dust from his overalls, shook hands, and then sat on a rock wall to answer their questions. Sally perched on the step up to his truck parked next to the wall, and Earl stood on either side of them.

“Ave no idea where that lad might have gone, like I said before. ‘Tis very strange. Maybe the missus was a bit pushy ‘bout marriage. When we married, we lived in a bedsit smaller than Simon’s at first, poor as poor can be. Without the Council housing, we’d still be homeless. Them and the NHS, who saved Martha when she gave birth to our youngest, are services that will forever make me vote against the damned Tories. ‘Course the recent ones have carried on the Iron Lady’s policies without being half as smart as she was. We’d have lost World War Two if those idiots had been in charge instead of Winnie.”

Earl only half-listened to the workingman’s twisted version of English history that had a ring of truth to it. With only two dinners at the Kilborn house, could Kevin be that close to Simon? But factoring in the truck’s repair and that story about quarter-round, one had to consider that manly discussions might have occurred.

“Did you ever talk about the Lake District, Kevin? Things to do that don’t cost too much money?”

“Sure. I go fishing from time to time. We talked about that. Man talk. Women are generally bored with fishing. Not a good activity for children either.”

Bingo, thought Earl.

What was the Yanks’ adage about failures? thought Earl. *Something related to their version of cricket.* The answer came to him after they failed to find Simon at the first two fishing spots Kevin had recommended to the lad. *Three strikes and you’re out!* Earl turned to face the handyman in the backseat of the station’s pool car.

“Those two spots were a bit questionable, to say the least.”

“Aye, but those twitchers’ blinds still make good spots to seek refuge when the cold winds come roaring down from the mountains bringing rain, sleet, or snow with them. Beats toughing it out on the lakes in a rowboat.”

“You couldn’t start a fire in them for a mash or fish fry. They’d catch fire with just one spark. All dead, dry wood.”

“I always have a thermos and packs me catch in wet moss, Inspector. ‘Tis easier to clean the fish at home.”

Earl bet Martha loved that.

“Do you ever run into twitchers?” Sally said without taking her eyes off the narrow and muddy road they were now on that was worse than the first two.

“They’re more common than the birds themselves during our summer months, but not where I fish. And those two were old spots, good but old. Next one’s a bit newer, but more distant. We’ll have more of a hike too, so you’ll need your wellies back on, sergeant.”

Earl and Kevin still had theirs, but Sally had removed hers to drive.

Kevin told Sally to pull over when the road widened a bit. “‘Tis a walk from here.”

“And quite a walk from Simon’s bedsit,” Earl said.

“Member that wee café we passed?” Kevin said.

Earl nodded. “Looked cozy and inviting. I think I stopped there once.”

“Marra, ‘tis that. ‘Ave the best bacon roll you’ll ever taste too. We can hit it on the way back to the village. Anyway, ‘tis a bus stop as well. One can travel all the way east to the North Sea by bus if needs be.”

Northumberland, thought Earl. *Simon wouldn’t have gone there even if he had the money for a ticket.*

They followed Kevin to a smaller lake and then around it. Sally and Earl stopped when the handyman did. He cupped his hands around his mouth to create a megaphone as he’d done at the first two stops.

“Simon, me lad, are you somewhere about? It’s Kevin. Are you hidin’ here? Kathy’s worried, lad. We’re all worried.”

“Tell him Tim’s worried too,” Sally said in a whisper.

“Your boss is worried too, lad. What’s going on?”

They saw the young man rise from the reeds at the lake’s edge about fifty yards away.

“Who’s that with you, Kevin?”

Earl demurred, not knowing how Simon would react to Sally and his presence. Kevin solved the problem.

“They be two nice plods from Penrith PD. Martha and me called them for Kathy. They’ve been helping us try to find you.”

“Go away, sir. Go away, all of you. I’ll only put you all in danger.”

“Can’t stay here hiding forever, lad. What will you do when the bad storms come? Hereabouts isn’t like your warm Wales. Look, you don’t have to marry Kathy, if that be what’s troublin’ you.”

“I love Kathy, Mr. Kilborn, but I don’t want her to get killed. I don’t want anyone to get killed ‘cept me. I deserve it. None of you do.”

“I know what you’re scared of, Simon,” Earl said, mimicking Kevin’s megaphone. “We will keep everyone safe, don’t worry. I’m Detective Inspector Earl Wilson from Penrith District Police. No one will hurt you or those you love. I guarantee it.”

"I'm not convinced. Plods don't even carry guns. You don't know what you're up against."

"Yes we do. We saw all that went down at the farm on video. I'll have an armed unit here shortly."

Actually, Earl had noted that Sally had already called for the unit. He was surprised she could get a signal. She saw that Kevin was staring at Earl. "It's okay, Mr. Kilborn," she whispered to him. "He's still a good lad, but some bad people are after him." The old man's jaw dropped.

Earl continued the long-distance conversation. "Come back with us, Simon, back to our car. We'll wait for the armed support."

"No way. Come here with Kevin and call them from here. Just make sure you can trust who you call."

"Sounds like a plan," Kevin said.

Earl shrugged. "Simon's directing this play."

He moved off, and Sally and Kevin followed.

Kevin and Simon hugged like they were father and son. "You have to tell me about your troubles, lad. Should have done that earlier."

Simon eyed Sally and Earl. They'd already introduced themselves and shown him their credentials—he seemed to warm more to Sally than Earl—but Earl wasn't sure Simon trusted either one of them.

"I couldn't, Mr. Kilborn. I made a promise to the government. It's a long story. Did you make your call, Inspector?" Earl nodded for Sally. "We'll wait here then."

"The armed unit won't be one of ours," Earl said. "It will be an MI5 ARU."

"Oh hell, more government types. Just what I need. They got me into this mess."

"Somehow someone recognized you, lad. Perhaps someone from Newcastle negotiating with those at the farm?"

Simon nodded. "The locals wanted a twofer. Told me themselves. Business ties with Newcastle to distribute their product and the bounty on my head." Simon noted Kevin's expression. "Sorry, Kevin. My past is a lot messier than just being an orphan and foster child from Wales. I might as well tell you, seeing as how it will probably all come out: I was in witness protection because I testified against a Newcastle syndicate. Somehow that protection was blown. To survive, I had to kill eight local gang members who were going to turn me over to that Newcastle group, if not kill me outright."

"My Lord! I can't believe it! You're such a nice lad!"

"That he is, Kevin," Sally said. The handyman probably felt betrayed. "And he still is. It's a complicated mess, but we have to end it now so you people can get on with your lives."

"Does Kathy know all this?"

"No. I never told her or you and your wife, figuring that if you didn't know, that would protect you. The last thing I wanted was for them to use you folks to get at me. That could get us all killed."

Earl put a finger to his lips. "We have visitors," he said in a whisper. "There's someone out there besides us, and it's too early for the ARU."

Earl had a *deja-vu* moment peering between the tree trunks. The quartet had moved up the hill from the edge of the lake to the sparse forest, which reminded him of some of his Bosnian war experiences.

He'd called Rick Barnes again and learned the ARU was still ten minutes out. He'd told Rick where they now were hiding just above Simon's original hideaway.

"They'll have to neutralize the scrotes first. Our drugs unit from Penrith has the goods on them, so they'll be in jail for a while."

"NCA's in on that now," Rick said. "Stay down and wait for the ARU."

For what? A quick death? Rick wasn't on scene; neither was his ARU. Earl knew it was up to them. Gunfire interrupted his thoughts.

The gang—or *gangs?*—weren't taking chances—*fearing another encounter with Simon?* They'd just destroyed the twitchers' blind, probably thinking that he still had the Uzi copy at hand.

Both Sally and Kevin looked desperately at Earl. He smiled at Simon.

"Got any ideas, double-oh-seven?"

"What does that mean?" Simon whispered back. "You plods aren't armed. We're all going to die."

Earl tapped his head. "But we're smarter than those pillocks. You proved that back at the farm. Let's spread out a bit and then follow my lead."

Once sorted behind new trees each about fifteen yards apart, Earl used his hands to create his megaphone again. "We've got 'em now!" he yelled. "They've told us where they are, the prats, shooting like that. They're sitting ducks now!"

"Shoot first and ask questions later," Simon called out, joining in the charade.

Smart lad! Your turn, Kevin!

"I've got their leader in my sights, Commander!" Kevin called out.

Commander? Earl liked the sound of that. "Make sure they're all covered and shoot to kill," he yelled.

By that time, all five scrotes were crouching and trying to determine where their adversaries were.

Coup de grace? thought Earl. *On the way!* "Twenty to five. They won't have a chance. Fire on my count."

With the perceived overwhelming force against them, the five bolted. Earl and the others waited a moment; then they heard gunfire followed by silence. Had the pillocks run into the MI5's ARU?

Kevin slapped Earl and Simon on their backs. "We're quite the team! You too, Sergeant."

Earl dangled his cuffs in front of Simon. "I have to put these on you, lad. Don't worry. They won't stay on for very long."

Three weeks later, Sally and Earl had a visitor at the station. Rick Barnes entered Earl's office once again and immediately sat down like he owned it, looking smug.

"You're dying to tell us something," Sally said.

"Not one but three things. Because only MI5, NCA, and you two know about Simon's past, he'll be able to continue his life here."

"What about the gangs?" Sally said.

"Those here are decimated and the leaders of that syndicate in Northumberland not already in jail will soon be. The evidence in the drugs lab and testimony of some of those

survivors captured at the lake will sink the locals. The attempted murder of Simon Edgewood at the farm and the negotiations to move product to Newcastle will finish the job. They'll all be in King Charlie's boarding houses for quite a while. MI5 and NCA have been busy." He paused as if he expected applause. Sally and Earl were smiling but remained silent. "Next piece of news: Kathy and Simon have set a wedding date. A small ceremony, honeymoon financed with our signing bonus, and I'm sure you two will be invited. Third point: In a few months, Simon will start his training. In three years, either MI5 or NCA will have an excellent, new agent. Probationary, of course."

Earl winked at Sally and then stared down Rick who needed to be deflated a bit. "I might work on him, Agent Barnes, to convince him he'd be a lot happier having a more normal life here, just doing what he was doing. Let's see which route the lad chooses."

"He will have an obligation."

Earl thought. "Is it met if he joins the police force instead?"

Rick frowned. "It usually goes the other way. Police to MI5 or NCA."

"There's always a first time."

Earl's plan was a bit different, though. He would work on the lad just like he said, but encourage him to have a full life in the Lake District with his new bride. He knew Simon didn't have to return that signing bonus. MI5 and NCA would probably just be giving the couple a wedding president!

The Fishing Trip

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DI Earl Wilson had to smile and then laugh when Simon hooked his first fish and nearly went overboard using the net to snare it. Old Kevin had to grab his new son-in-law by the belt to keep him from falling in.

Earl had to admire the lad. He'd turned his life around and become a card-carrying and honest member of the great middle class. With a new bride—Earl could imagine that Kathy and Simon might soon make Martha and Kevin new grandparents—a steady job at the auto repair shop where he'd soon have a chance to take over when his boss retired, and plenty of extra work helping Kevin, the busy handyman and father-in-law, Simon would be more than okay. He was even losing some of his Geordie accent and sounding like a Lake District local at times.

Earl thought the lad had hooked another fish—beginner's luck!—when he stood up in the boat and pointed across the lake waters. "There's a boat with a body in it, Inspector!"

Earl didn't stand—he knew better, and the boat was already swaying side to side. "Sit down, lad!" He squinted but still had to shade his eyes. "I believe you're right. Hopefully, just some fisherman taking a catnap. We made an early start too. The fish wake up and have breakfast early."

Kevin and Earl took the oars, not wanting to wake the bloke up by starting the motor if he was asleep but still feeling the responsibility of checking up on him. Unfortunately, Simon had been correct. There was a body in the boat, and the head trauma and blood indicated the man had been attacked.

"Lash the boat onto ours, you two," Earl said. "I'm cranking up the outboard. We need to go ashore so I can use the radio in my old truck. We'll need the SOCOs and a pathologist."

"Is the boat a crime scene now, Guv?" Simon said.

Earl had to smile. The lad was mimicking his sergeant more than him. She was also a frequent guest at Martha and Kevin's house along with Earl and Simon. Kathy and Simon lived above a car repair shop in a bedsit; Earl had seen bigger closets in rich people's mansions. The two were saving to lease or buy something bigger.

By the time the pathologist and SOCOs arrived, Earl had recorded what the three fishermen had seen on his mobile, complete with pictures. He sent Kevin and Simon home in Earl's truck with his boat because Sally had arrived too. She could drop Earl at Martha and Kevin's house so he could get his truck.

Sally became busy on her moby trying to identify the victim—miraculously she had a few bars; Earl's 4G model had none—so Earl walked the lake shore, trying to find the spot where the rowboat had been set afloat with the body. There were two more moorings to the east and three to the west. He'd chosen to use theirs because he'd had the most luck fishing there.

His surveillance task took him a good forty minutes, but he found the probable launch point, the second of the three western moorings. He checked the third to make sure and then briskly returned. Arriving at the original site, he waved Harry, the lead SOCO, over.

"Second pier west of here has reeds beaten down. There are two old rowboats still there. I'm thinking our victim's funeral boat might have been a third. There are recent car tracks, maybe from a Rover with one bald tire. Get what spoor you can find there, if you will."

Harry nodded. "Any idea who owns those rowboats?"

"Maybe you can tell me that eventually. No names on the boats. Couple of diners and pubs hereabouts might know. I'll be sending some DCs to help out. The boats might just be abandoned, though."

"Could be. The one the victim was in was old and ready to sink with a small hole in the bottom. Might have been the idea, to be honest, but his bloody shirt acted like a cork. Otherwise, we'd never have known what happened to the old geezer."

"Old? How old?"

"Older than you, and that's saying something."

Earl ignored the taunt. "A local maybe?"

"We need to ID him, Guv. Could be, but you don't know him and Kevin doesn't either, so maybe not. Not tourist season either, though. Someone passing through from down south maybe?"

"Any idea how long he's been dead?"

"I'd guess he was put out in the lake last night sometime. Otherwise, the boat would have sunk despite the bloody shirt. But you'd better wait for Doc's official TOD."

"Might not be the same as the boat launch. You fellers can send me your reports. Sally and I had better start looking for mispers. Like you said, we have to ID this bloke."

If Harry was right about the time the rowboat was launched, which meant the victim had been killed sometime before that, it was possible no one had reported the man missing yet. As a consequence, Sally and he stopped at a convenient pub during the return trip to the nick to have a quick pint and an early lunch. Earl took the opportunity to query the publican, who had no idea who their victim might be; the victim hadn't patronized the club, which started selling breakfasts early in the morning.

Sally eyed her guv over her ale glass. "How did Simon handle that experience on the lake?"

"Happy to land his first catch, the lad was. He and Kevin are tight now. I guess the old man is the father Simon never had."

"That's not what I meant."

"He spotted the rowboat and the body. Didn't seem to give him much aggro. Can't say he's seen as many dead as a soldier might, but he's certainly seen enough in his short life. Kind of gives one a thick skin, you know. Almost seemed like he was more excited about us having another case to solve."

"Maybe wanting us to forget about his?" Earl shrugged. "I'd think the experience would have taken all the joy out of catching his first fish."

"Lad's a natural for that if he learns to handle the net. A few practice casts and he was ready to go."

"And Kevin?"

"He's an old hand. No problem."

"I meant, how did he react to finding a body?"

"He's an old soldier. He was more worried about Simon tipping our boat over. He didn't know the victim, by the way. Neither do I. We need to get busy back at the station. I want to know who that bloke is. Or was. We can then pry into his life to see who would want to kill him."

"Brutally."

"I'll give you that. Lots of anger at the very least."

“So...should we get to it?”

“As soon as I can flag down Rita.”

“This place is busy, and it’s only eleven-thirty. I’ve never been here.”

“You should see it during the tourist season. We locals take these places for granted, but all the hikers and twitchers want to experience a cozy Lake District pub. In the Big Smoke, they’ve turned the typical pubs into American sports bars, you know. They call it making London cosmopolitan.”

“That’s occurring in Newcastle too. Morpeth is a bit more sedate.” She frowned. “I’m not looking forward to preparing another murder board, Guv.”

He smiled. Their last major case had been Simon’s; they’d started out with eight victims in a case that eventually involved both MI5 and NCA. “Hopefully, we can keep the spooks out of this one. Rick Barnes was a bit hard to take.”

Sally smiled. Earl knew she fancied the MI5 agent.

Major crime in the Lake District was rare except for spillovers from the big cities in the south and east: Birmingham, Durham, Liverpool, Manchester, and Newcastle. The Penrith Police District spent most of its time on solving lesser crimes, from stealing livestock and farm equipment to peddling illegal drugs. There were plenty of yobbies around, among them those who preyed on tourists, and they all kept the police busy enough. It was rare when the district’s CIDs saw the crime the big cities saw, though, especially what occurred so often in London.

As it turned out, there was a missing person. Mrs. Helen Simmons, a woman who ran a boarding house in a hamlet not far from the lake had been expecting a visit from her brother, Wayne Ross, a resident of Durham. The woman’s daughter was getting married and wanted her Uncle Wayne to give her away because her father had passed on.

Sally and Earl paid Mrs. Simmons a visit. She was already accompanied by a Family Liaison Officer who warned the two detectives that her charge was quite unstable. But the elderly woman agreed to talk to them, sitting down with them in the boarding house’s comfortable parlor with tissue box at the ready.

She didn’t look like a dowdy boarding house manager, though. Dressed to the nines, including what looked like a pearl necklace and earrings, fashionably coiffed hair, and expertly applied makeup, she could have looked good on any MP’s arm...or an MP herself like the Iron Lady about to give a speech on the floor of Commons. Is the boarding house business that good? It wasn’t tourist season, after all.

“Can you imagine? We’ve had to postpone the wedding to have a funeral!”

Sally glanced at Earl with eyebrows raised; he nodded. They had no idea when the pathologist and coroner would release the body, but Earl didn’t want to get into that. Sally followed his lead and made no comment about the old hag being more worried about the wedding than her brother’s demise.

“Tell me, Mrs. Simmons, about your brother. What did he do for a living?”

“Some kind of research. He is-was-a brilliant man, my little brother, a chemist who worked in a pharmaceutical company in Durham. Way beyond my understanding is what he did, but I think he invented new drugs to help people. I don’t think the rest of the family knew that. You know how it goes, detectives. I dare say none of them really cared.”

For a moment, her grief had turned to anger. Sally was very familiar with dysfunctional families. She wondered how many guests would have been attending the wedding.

“What about his life in Durham? Was he married? Does he have family there?”

“Heavens no. We’re northerners, our Ross clan.” She slipped into some distant memory. “Simmons was my dear husband’s name. We owned and ran this establishment. Some of our customers return every year during the summer months. Other times we survive with traveling salespeople. Not the most elegant boarding house in the area, but our service is exemplary and reasonably priced. Breakfast and/or dinner plans are available. Tell your relatives and friends.”

Sally smiled at the advert. “Do you remember the name of Wayne’s company?”

“No, but I have a business card somewhere. Hold on a moment.”

She left the room. They heard drawers opening and shutting. She soon returned triumphantly and handed Sally a card.

“Drake Pharmaceuticals,” Sally read. “Did he describe his work there in any more detail?”

“Only what I already said. And I wouldn’t have understood much more. Oh, he once told me had several patents. I think he meant that he’d created several new drugs, right? Doesn’t one’s company hold the patents?”

“Generally that’s the case,” Earl said. “The researcher signs an agreement when he’s hired. Do you know anyone in the Penrith area who would want to harm your brother?”

“He got along with everyone, Inspector. He had the usual barneys with schoolmates growing up, but that was long ago. And he hasn’t lived in this area for donkey’s years. But he’s Barb’s only uncle. Barbara is my daughter.”

“I assume she’s disappointed,” Sally said.

“For the wedding, yes, but she’s enraged about how someone would do this to her Uncle Wayne. As we all are in the family. Please find who did this despicable act!”

“We’ll do our best, as always,” Earl said. He handed her his own card. “We might have to talk with you again, Mrs. Simmons. And feel free to call us if you can think of anything more that might help us.”

Drake Pharmacuticals had never heard of Wayne Ross. Had he lied to his family all those years? Had he even lived in Durham? Earl didn’t know what to think.

Sally managed to verify that he’d received a doctorate from Birmingham University. What could he have been doing if not employed by Drake?

They decided not to tell Mrs. Simmons, her daughter, or any other family members for the moment. Earl wanted to find out more about the mysterious scientist. He and Sally began to call other police departments in northern England, Earl using many contacts he’d developed over the years. Two DCs were trawling for anything in social media about Wayne.

The Home Office’s Border Force came up with one interesting item: Wayne Ross made a round trip in 2027 to Prague, capital of the Czech Republic.

“Not first on my list as a place to visit as a tourist,” Earl said, “so maybe he went for some other reason. Obviously not a business trip for Drake Pharmaceuticals either, but maybe one related to his research?”

It all came down to knowing what the secretive man had been doing since he left the university years earlier. Someone had to know.

As much as Earl hated to trawl computer databases, he stubbornly went at it, finding one more item: Ross had purchased a new Range Rover in Aberdeen four years earlier, and he had paid for it in cash. The dealer had no home address or telephone number for the scientist. Earl bet it wouldn’t have been Durham. Had he been living there or some other place in Scotland?

Earl gave his team the task of answering that question, but that datum also suggested that Sally and Earl should pay Mrs. Simmons another visit. It was time to tell her that her little brother's life wasn't what she'd thought it was.

"I don't understand. I gave you that business card. He gave it to me."

"Did he or does anyone in your family have connections to Scotland?" Sally said.

Earl was letting her run the interview again. Women often thought he was a gruff old bloke.

"Some cousins, Sergeant. A lot of people across northern England have Scottish friends and relatives just over the border."

"Whereabouts, ma'am?"

She sighed. "I suppose I could make a list. They're mostly in the west and center. One family even runs an inn near Loch Ness. Not the best place to visit in winter, I dare say." She smiled. "I guess the tourist industry is in our blood. I know my relatives best. My husband had some in Glasgow as well. I've lost contact with most of them. But why would Wayne be living up there?"

Earl didn't want to say what he was thinking. He could imagine a very lucrative activity with many benefits for an expert pharmaceutical chemist. He'd need to consult with Penrith PD's Drugs Enforcement Division. Their investigations often led to liaisons with the NCA's drugs division, but the coppers at Penrith PD knew a lot about the drugs trade.

"We'd appreciate a list of any names you can remember, Mrs. Simmons," was all he said.

Their calls back at the station soon included the new names. One of Mr. Simmons' relatives in Glasgow was candid. "I once asked Wayne why he hadn't taken advantage of all that schooling. His answer was, 'I am.' I didn't like his sleazy smile. But I'm prejudiced. I never liked his sister, but I liked him even less."

"So, he was in Glasgow?"

"Oh, sure. For a while. Can't say we saw him that much, which was okay by me. He was a bit creepy, I dare say."

"So, you weren't going to the daughter's wedding?"

"What wedding? I didn't even know my cousin had a daughter, Inspector."

"Um, thank you for your information, sir."

When Earl told Sally about that conversation, she had the same reaction. "Maybe Mrs. Simmons's baby brother had a life she didn't know about. In any case, Wayne ended up in Glasgow. We still have to connect the dots from Birmingham to there, and from there to here."

"A very secretive life, Sally, one that might have got him killed."

She nodded. "Someone wasn't too happy with him, that's for sure. Someone who doesn't like boats."

"How's that?"

"I would have filled his pockets with rocks, rowed him out to the middle of that lake, and dumped him. Depending on that boat sinking was a mistake."

He smiled. "That's why we're such a good team. You see things that I don't."

"I can't see that my observation helps. A scrote who's afraid of water or boats was obviously still a murderer."

"It might limit our search to the middle of the country, though, away from the coastal areas. I'm afraid we're going to have ask NCA for some help, bless their dark, spooky souls."

Long ago in London, Earl had worked under DS Matthew Finley as his DC. They'd shared a loathing for their DI at the Met and become friends and drinking mates. Matt was now with the NCA, so Earl called him.

After some pleasantries, Earl got down to business. He told Matt about the case and what they knew about the victim so far.

"I know Drake, and let me warn you that you should take what they told you with a grain of salt. Big Pharma is often international—they like to test questionable drugs in Africa, for example—and they don't even like the whiff of authorities snooping around. Drake might be clean in general, but they probably cut corners just like the worst of them. I'm suspicious of any pharmaceutical corporation that manufactures both the patented and generic forms of a drug overseas and markets them both in the UK."

"That's allowed?"

"Just about everywhere now for the international corporations."

"So, you think Ross might have really worked for Drake?"

"Doing things we might not approve of, yes. The most profitable way to market a drug these days is to make it addictive so customers keep buying it. So many people self-medicate now. My daughter ordered some children's cough syrup from Bulgaria. I had it tested. It had some trace amounts of some really nasty stuff in addition to codeine. Definitely not appropriate for young children! If anything, these places' quality control can be sorely lacking."

"Um, I guess they think adequate quality control costs them too much money. But how would Ross be involved in something like that? He's a skilled scientist."

"Good question, and I can't answer it specifically for him. What I can do for you, old friend, is push it up the ladder, maybe even to Gretchen herself."

"Who's Gretchen?"

"Gretchen Williams, the director of our drugs division. She'll know someone who might be able to tell us how Ross was spending his time, and why he was so secretive about it."

"I'd appreciate that."

"Not if you lose the case to us." Matt laughed. "Marra, I know you so well."

"Indeed. I just want to solve a murder case. NCA's investigations all too often go far beyond that. They want to close down an entire drugs syndicate. They can do that if that's what this case leads to as long as I can solve my case."

"From what you've told me, the world's probably better off being rid of Wayne Ross."

"That's not for us to say."

"Of course not. I'll try to get back to you by day's end. On a lighter note, how was the fishing?"

"Neither the father-in-law nor I caught anything, but my other guest landed one. Beginner's luck. He also spotted the rowboat with Ross's body in it."

"Sign him up!"

Earl decided not to tell Matt that was what MI5 or NCA had wanted to do. So far they had nixed that.

Matt didn't return Earl's call; Director Williams did. "Matt brought me up to speed on your case. We've been interested in Drake, and Wayne Ross in particular, for a long time, Inspector Wilson."

"You can call me Earl, ma'am."

"If you call me Gretchen. Ma'am makes me feel so damn old. You will be asking why we're interested, I'm sure. There's a lot of bad stuff coming in over the border. Maybe Drake's not involved directly, but they're not drugs you can produce in an old farmhouse somewhere either."

"Coming from Glasgow, are they?"

"Drake has factories all over. A lot in India and in the old SSRs like Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. But Edinburgh and Glasgow seem to be the source of much of the bad stuff, so either it's manufactured there or they're used as ports of entry. You probably don't care as much about where the drugs are made or who distributes them, only about Ross's involvement. We suspect he comes up with the formulas that make it hard for us to tell the good stuff from the bad."

"With the price of drugs these days, I suppose lots of customers mail order them. That should lead you to the distributors."

"People do that at their peril. And the orders usually are made on the internet now. The customer's order might seem to go somewhere legit, but it can end up at a questionable distributor. That makes it hard for us to track."

"I'd think the manufacturers, Drake or otherwise, wouldn't want to call attention to themselves by selling tainted drugs."

"Not all consumers are affected. The nasty stuff can be something as simple as cheap binders producing bad side effects in only some people, including hallucinations and psychotic episodes."

"And Wayne Ross would be the person to formulate the drug with those cheaper ingredients?"

"Maybe not on purpose, because his task might just be to produce a cheaper product. He, and they, might not know or care how that's accomplished."

"Well, he's dead. My task, my only one, is to find out who killed him. Any suggestions?"

"Let's assume he had second thoughts about what he was doing and wanted to expose Drake's bad practices. What would the VIPs at Drake do?"

"Hire someone to kill him?"

"Bingo. That's my guess, but don't say it came from me. And that hired killer knew Ross was going to a wedding in your area."

Earl saw Sally's worried frown after he told her about the chat with NCA's VIP.

"Let's forget about making me have aggro thinking about the prescribed meds in my future and focus on my worry that we'll have a cold case. There's no chance that Ross's murder's still in the area, is there?"

"No, unless he wants to make sure we get no joy in our investigation. But here's another question that might unsettle you: How did the murderer know Ross was coming here for a wedding? Clearly he had to be near Ross in some way, either physically or communicating with him. Besides that, why didn't he just kill Ross wherever he was at before he came to the Lake District?"

"What if he's a local? He'd only have to wait until Ross came to him."

Earl pondered that and then smiled. Something about Mrs. Simmons had been niggling at him for a while. He pulled a file folder from the pile on his desk. "Didn't you think that Mrs. Simmons was a bit overdressed for running a boarding house?"

Sally shrugged. "Market day? Visiting a friend? Who knows? What's in the file?"

Earl waved some papers. "A list of board members for Drake Pharmaceuticals." He handed the first sheet to his sergeant. "Look at the fifth name."

"Ross? So they lied. He did work for them! Oh, Helen Ross, not Wayne Ross. Mrs. Simmons's first name is Helen, and her maiden name is Ross!"

"Drake lied, but Mrs. Simmons lied as well. She knew all about Drake."

"And she had to know what little brother did there. Or somewhere else so Drake could claim he wasn't on the payroll. So, what's the conclusion?"

"I'm not sure, but I believe another visit to the boarding house is in order."

Sally and Earl were relaxing in the pool car a bit in order to sort out how they would question Helen Simmons before entering the boarding house when a taxi pulled up. Earl expected one of the residents would come out, suitcases in hand, and drive away in the cab. Instead, it was Mrs. Simmons. They jumped out of their car as the cabbie took her suitcases and tossed them in the boot.

"Going somewhere, ma'am?" Earl said.

She spun around to face him. "Sergeant, Inspector. What a pleasant surprise! So nice to see you again."

"Just answer my question, ma'am."

"If you must know, I'm off to visit some relatives in Glasgow. Barb can't decide yet on another date for the wedding, and you plods are taking your time with Wayne's body, so I thought I'd take a holiday to calm my frazzled nerves. Business is slow this time of year anyway."

Earl thought that her facial expressions had covered a wide range of nerves, anger, and suspicions about their sudden appearance. But he thought she was very good at lying on the fly. He didn't need her in an interrogation room to determine that.

"I bet it was a letdown for those relatives and others that Wayne's death delayed the wedding." She quickly nodded at his suggestion. "Did you inform Helen Ross on the board of directors of Drake as well?"

"I have no idea who or what you're talking about. I recognize that company name, of course. Wayne used to work there."

"Not according to them. And they never mentioned that Helen Ross was on the board. We discovered that. Interesting coincidence of surnames, don't you think? I see that your necklace is now rubies and esmeralds. How many shares do you own, ma'am?"

"I-I-I need my inhaler." She pretended to go into a wheezing fit and started to rummage in her purse.

Earl stepped forward and took it from her. "If true, I bet you don't use Drake's brand. Aha! What do we have here?" Earl held up an old .38 pistol for Sally to see. She smiled. "Did you really think you could kill two police officers and get away with it, Mrs. Simmons?"

"Max, do something!" she cried to the cabby.

Sally went into her martial arts readiness stance, but the cabbie's eyes were still on the gun. "He's got your gun, Helen."

"And we're all going to take a little trip back to our nick. You two will go handcuffed, of course. Sally, I'll exchange this nasty little pistol for your cuffs to do the honors, and then you can first call for backup and second for a search warrant for Helen's quarters in the boarding house. Who knows what we'll find?"

Hours later in an interrogation room, Earl confronted Mrs. Simmons, nee Helen Ross, with the evidence they had against her: Legal papers showing that she owned nearly sixty percent of Drake Pharmaceutical's stock; Wayne's documents and a folded wedding invitation, showing her attempts to delay the police's investigation; and written testimony from the cabbie, where he explained how he'd helped the woman take her brother's body to the lake. Earl thought the latter was just icing on the cake because it was hard to get rid of blood traces in a car's boot—something always remained.

She then made her barrister's life difficult by offering even more testimony that now would be on videotape.

"That little shite developed a conscience! He was going to ruin everything. What he was doing for Drake was putting us back in the black, damn it! He made me so mad when he started blathering about scientific ethics and morality, so I belted him a good one." She slumped. "Don't know my own strength, I guess." Her cold eyes stared into Earl's. "What will happen to me?"

"In the old days, you would hang, madam. Nowadays you'll probably only be King Charlie's guest for a long time. I don't think you'll be on Drake's board of directors anymore. In fact, I seriously doubt that Drake or its subsidiaries will survive after NCA gets through with them."

She sighed. "Tell me, Inspector, why did you plods worry so much about finding Wayne's murderer? That silly prat deserved what he got!"

Earl winked at Sally and then smiled at Mrs. Simmons. "Our job is to solve crimes, ma'am. A murder was committed, and we went about solving it. But never fear. NCA will clean up your mess. And you will have plenty of time in your cell to think about what you've done. A very long time."

The Night Visitor

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[Note from Steve: This story is completely new in the sense that I've never published it in my blog or elsewhere. Consider it a bonus for all you readers of this little collection. Like the last story, this one connects with the second, but it's a completely new mystery. Enjoy.]

Earl put down his cards and said, "Gin!"

Kevin rolled his eyes at his wife Martha and Sally laughed at their expressions.

"You're winning all the beans, Guv," she said to her boss.

"I think we should switch to poker," Kevin said. "This game is too easy, and I'm not any good at it. Half your cards you got from me, Inspector!"

"That's a bit contradictory, husband," Martha said. "And I don't like poker. My pops drove my mum mad because he'd often lose a lot of money playing that game."

"We could just play for chips," Kevin said.

"Or beans," Earl said with a smile. He looked around the table at his sergeant and new friends. "Quiet around her with the two lovebirds off on their honeymoon, isn't it?"

"At least they're not here losing beans like I am," Kevin said with a growl, his gravelly voice accentuating his feigned displeasure. There was a knock at the front door. "Who can that be?"

"Go see, Luv," Martha said. "It's my turn to shuffle and deal."

Kevin left the small dining room, went through the sitting room, and into the foyer, his progress obvious to the remaining three because the working man's boots clomped like a draft horse's hooves on the old tile floors where there were few area rugs.

The next thing the three heard was "Holy shite!"

The three jumped up from their seat and ran to the foyer.

"Call 999!" Earl said to Sally upon seeing the bleeding man with a knife in his chest. While she dashed back to the table for her mobile, he knelt by the victim.

Kevin had gone to peer out of the open front door into the night. "No sign of anyone streetside. There's a trail of blood from the street along our walkway up to the door, though."

"Does anyone know this poor chap?" Earl said.

Before Kevin could answer, Martha said, "Can't you do anything for him, Earl?"

Her guest had already checked the carotid for a pulse. "He's dead, Martha. Just made it through the door." Earl closed the dead eyes. "Good Lord, Kevin, when you told me a while back that this neighborhood had its problems, I never imagined that you meant anything like this."

"Was talking about toe-rags stealing gas, tires, and radios out of cars and making mischief on Halloween, not someone getting stabbed to death. And I don't know this chappie. Ignoring the blood, he's dressed like a toff with the three-piece and watch fob, so he doesn't look like any neighbors we know."

"Do you have any gloves, Sally?" Earl said to his sergeant who'd returned with her moby and purse in hand. She pulled a pair out of the bag and handed them to Earl. "Back up, you three. This foyer is a crime scene now. Fetch some chairs from the dining room, Sally." He indicated the bloody footprints, most of them from Kevin's boots. "The three of us will have to sit down and remove our shoes."

While she returned to the dining room to get the chairs, Earl put on the gloves and searched the corpse. He found a wallet with a driver's license. "Charles F. Barrington. Anyone know him?"

"There's a legal firm, Andrews, Barrington, and Crandall, on the road entering Penrith just before the High Street," Martha said. "I have a friend who works as a secretary there. She calls it the ABC shop." She put her hand over her mouth, apparently realizing that it wasn't the time to pass on a bit of humor.

Kevin shrugged. "We don't move in them social circles, Earl, but that could be your identification for this victim."

"No matter. We'll get it sorted. Who did you get, Sally?" Earl had noticed that Sally was back on the phone.

"The duty sergeant. He and the custody sergeant will call the pathologist and SOCOs. I cancelled the ambulance. Some PCs will be coming along too to control the crime scene. I figured we'd take the case because we're already here."

"I suppose. An ugly way to end a pleasant evening, I dare say."

"Should I fetch a mop and bucket of soapy water?" Martha said. "Our foyer's a mess!"

"I'm sorry, Martha," Sally said. "We can't disturb the crime scene. You three must sit down and remove your shoes and hand them to me. You too, Earl. All of you have stepped in the victim's blood."

"There are enough undisturbed pools for the SOCOs," Earl complained, "but we don't want to mess up the rest of the house either." He waddled over and was the first to plop down into a chair.

Kevin followed his example. "And then what?"

"Back to the dining room to wait for the forensic specialists to invade. Kind of a worthless wait considering we already know COD and TOD, but we'll follow the protocol forced upon us by the Crown Prosecution Service. I already broke it to see if the victim was still among the living and then to ID him, but the first was an emergency and the second was done with gloves." He eyed the other three. "Somehow, I don't feel like resuming our game, though."

Martha made tea for everyone and brought a tray of homemade tea cakes along with it that she'd prepared that day for the card game. While she served as mother, Earl was busy on his mobile, and Sally had gone outside through the backdoor to walk around the house and wait for the crime scene crew.

When the pathologist and SOCOs arrived and got busy at the front of the house and the foyer, Sally returned to the dining room the same way she'd left. "Any more word on the victim's ID, Guv?"

Earl held up a finger, so everyone waited. After ringing off, he said, "Martha's guess is confirmed. Charles Francis Barrington is indeed a barrister. He just successfully ended a court case. Apparently, he left the little celebratory party in Penrith and headed for his favorite pub to celebrate on his own. That pub just happens to be located seven blocks from here."

Kevin nodded. "Must be *The Golden Goose*."

"Not a very high-class place for a man in a three-piece suit," Martha said.

Earl shrugged. "But maybe friendlier service, better drinks, and more wholesome and abundant food than your posh establishments?" Kevin nodded. "That's all a tired barrister needs. Maybe he came from this area originally and likes to get away from all the toffs."

"Or get away from his employees who aren't toffs," Martha said.

"I don't know any Barringtons in the area, and we've lived here a while," Kevin said.

"People move on," Sally said.

“Or, people move up and move on,” Martha said, “when they think they’re too good to live around here. I can ask my friend what her opinion is concerning Mr. Barrington. He can’t be a saint, can he, if he represents the criminal elements?”

“You’re assuming that’s what he does, woman,” Kevin said.

“If he’s in private practice, it’s likely he’s not on the side of the Crown,” Sally said. “And sometimes law firms do both, making money both ways.”

“All scum of the Earth in my view,” Earl said. “You heard the one about a busload of barristers landing in the Thames and sinking, Kevin?”

“No, Inspector. Is it okay for the delicate ears of our lovely ladies here?”

“It’s one that you can’t say you heard from me, but not sexually oriented.”

“Oh, get on with it,” Martha said. “You were telling jokes all night that were off-color. I’m surprised you didn’t embarrass your sergeant. I’ve heard enough at *The Golden Goose* over the years that I have a thick skin,”

“And I thought I’d also heard all of Earl’s,” Sally said. “So, Guv, get it off your chest.”

“‘Tis simple, folks: A busload of barristers at the bottom of the Thames is called a good start.”

All three groaned, but the joke helped lighten their moods.

The next morning, they didn’t waste time, arriving when the ABC legal firm opened its doors at nine. Sally couldn’t help thinking of Christie’s *The A. B. C. Murders*, but she and Earl hoped in the current situation that A and C weren’t also targets.

They met with Mr. Crandall, a small, weasly man with beady eyes, who was also dressed in a three-piece suit, with bow tie in his case.

“I understand that Mr. Barrington had just finished a case and was celebrating?”

Crandall spread his hand on his cluttered desk. “We all were. Charlie likes to have a nightcap at *The Golden Goose* on his way home. His residence is east of and far from here. It’s one of a cluster of houses around a lake. He’s an original resident of the Lake District, Inspector. In any case, that’s why he was near that house.”

“So, he didn’t know Mr. and Mrs. Kilborn?” Sally said.

“If he did, I didn’t know about it. That pub is in a dangerous part of that village. Fights often spill out from it onto the street, I’m told.”

“We’re interviewing the publican, wait staff, and clients now. Back to the case just finished. Can you tell us about it?”

“The Crown Court was prosecuting a gentleman we represent. Their case had lots of holes. I’m surprised the CPS even let the case go forward.”

Sally and Earl both frowned. The CPC was often the bane of their existence and turned away solid cases the police had presented against criminals for trivial technicalities. Earl resolved to find out more about the case.

“So, it was an easy case?” he said.

“Not really. Charlie and our staff worked hard on it because there was a chance our client might receive some jail time for some lesser charges.”

They discussed the case a bit more, but Earl wanted Penrith PD’s take. He couldn’t imagine the yob who’d escaped justice would attack his barrister, though. But what about that yob’s victims?

They found Barrington's client, Michael "Big Mike" Drummond, sitting on a bench in a square not far from *The Golden Goose*. The address the law firm had for him had turned out to be a bakery on the square owned by his sister-in-law who told them where "that good-for-nothin' prat" was. As they approached him, Sally noticed that he looked lost in his thoughts with a sad expression on his face. Was he lamenting the death of Charlie Barrington?

"Mr. Drummond?" Earl said, interrupting those thoughts. They both showed their warrant cards. He nodded. "Can we have a word with you?"

"Plods in Penrith tried to stick me in it, so they now turn to the less privileged locals?"

Earl sat next to him while Sally remained standing and got ready with her mobile and stylus to take notes.

"We're here about your barrister, Mr. Charles Barrington."

Big Mike smiled. "An okay chap, Mr. Barrington. He gave stick to those prosecutors."

"I want to relive that case, Mike, but only in the sense if you know of anyone associated with it who made threats against Mr. Barrington. Relatives of your victim, for example."

"Alleged victim. The Crown lost the case. Not surprising, because I had nothing to do with that woman. I only know what she looked like because the pillocks showed photos of her in the courtroom." He thought about the question some more. "Her brother was none too happy about the verdict. But wouldn't he come after me for revenge, not Mr. Barrington?"

"Your alleged victim was killed with a similar knife. Maybe he's trying to frame you?"

Mike frowned. "That's a stretch. I'm not in hiding. Josh Kensington can find me easily enough."

"And why are you here?"

"Trying to salvage my life and plan my future. My sister-in-law evicted me."

"How's that?"

"I rented the flat above her bakery from her. Nothing great; not more than a bedsit, really. But she doesn't want me about anymore. I have to find somewhere else to live now. I guess she thought I was ending up in King Charlie's boarding house, so she already had lined up another lessee who's stupid enough to rent that tip. Go figure." He sighed. "I couldn't stand the odor of fresh scones anymore anyways. You don't need enemies when you got family."

Earl nodded. "There's a shelter three blocks over." He gave Mike a card. "Show this to the manager, Eddie Kincaid. He might have a temporary place for you until you get sorted and back on your feet. Do you have work?"

"I checked, and the answer is yes. I drove forklifts at a warehouse, and they still need help. I just need a place to live now, so thanks for the temporary solution."

"Back to our problem, solving Charles Barrington's murder. Did the alleged victim have more relatives or friends?"

"No idea. As far as I know, just Josh and Trish. They almost had to carry that screaming eejit from the courtroom. But all that anger was directed at me, not Mr. Barrington."

"So this Josh Kensington thought you killed his sister?"

"Raped and killed. Thing is, I had seen Trish a few times and put her out of mind. She'd get loaded and chat up blokes in the pub. A real party girl, she was. Not my type, though, so out of mind she was for me. He'd get soused too, so maybe it's all guilt on his part?"

"That's very perceptive, Mike," Sally said.

"Yes, I think we should have a little chat with Mr. Kensington," Earl added.

He wound down the interview, ending by reminding Big Mike about Eddie.

As they walked back to their little EV pool car parked at one side of the square, Sally said to Earl, "Guv, that was a nice thing you did for Mike."

"Um, no skin off my nose, lass, and I can often tell by looking in someone's eyes if they've got any decency. Big Mike didn't rape or kill that woman. I'm surprised that our main nick's officers even hauled him in. I'm thinking that they just picked out the most likely suspect from some pub's clients where Trish Kensington was chatting up all the chaps there. I'll want to talk with the copper who had that case too."

The DI in the main station who'd handled the case against Big Mike turned out to be a prat, so Earl didn't waste too much time to him. Earl also concluded that the DI had felt pressure from the police VIPs to find anyone with any form at all to charge with Trish Kensington's rape and murder; of course, those VIPs had probably felt pressure from the media's uproar. The Kensington family was a well-respected toff clan in the Lake District's politics.

With Joshua Kensington, Earl couldn't agree with that well-respected perception. He was the kind of spoiled rich kid who Earl loved to hate. He and his sister Patricia had lived in the family's old summer home, a stately old manse at the end of a rural lane. Neither one had to work for a living because of their generous allowances provided by their rich father who was the UK's ambassador to Japan. The parents hadn't even attended Trish's funeral because the father was negotiating some treaty involving both Japan and Taiwan. Josh said there would be a memorial service later.

Getting the family's situation out of the way, Earl probed into the young chap's courtroom outburst.

Josh shrugged. "Yeah, I just lost the rag a bit. That scrote got off on technicalities. You'd have been upset too, Inspector."

"People get upset with many things in court. With the judges, lawyers, defendants, and proceedings, all can upset observers. From what I heard, though, you were extremely upset. What thing upset you the most?"

"I don't have to answer that."

"No, you don't. And I haven't cautioned you. And frankly, I don't need your answer. There's a video of the proceedings, so I can satisfy my curiosity by watching it. I thought I'd be fair and get your take, though. I already have Mike Drummond's." Earl saw the anger color the lad's face red, starting at his neck and rising.

"I strenuously object to you interviewing him first. My father will hear about that. What's going on? Are you plods now taking his side?"

"We're not from the main Penrith station, Josh. We've a murder to solve, as you well know."

"Does that scrote have a good alibi? I bet he could kill his own barrister just to avoid the fees! He got away with one stabbing, so he thought he could get away with another."

"We haven't yet released that Mr. Barrington was stabbed to death, Josh. How did you come by that information?"

Josh looked flustered. "I must have seen it in some news report? Even if you didn't officially release the information."

"I don't think you did. Only police personnel at our substation and two other people knew that Mike's lawyer was stabbed."

"Well, he raped and stabbed my sister to death, so maybe I just figured he'd stabbed his barrister."

Earl left it at that and changed topic, rather enjoying how uncomfortable Josh seemed. “Did you know Charles Barrington, Josh?”

“Mr. Crandall represented me once, so I knew the firm. My father says that it’s reputable.”

“Indeed. And for what case was Crandall representing you?” Earl already knew the answer, but he wanted to see if the lad continued to lie. “I could look it up, but it’s easier to hear it from you.”

Again the red flush occurred. “A girlfriend accused me of roughing her up a bit. She hit me first, though. She’s a wild one. Living up to her name, I guess.”

“How’s that?”

“Carmen Silva. Carmen, like the opera, you know?”

“Did you do any time for that?”

“Crandall got me off with community service. Had to sweep some streets.” Earl smiled. “Would you believe that bitch showed up and handed me a new broom. Said it was a farewell present.”

“We’ll get Carmen’s side of that story. Seems you’re a bit volatile, Josh. Maybe you stabbed your sister?”

“What!? I didn’t rape my sister, damn it! Are you feckin’ mad?”

Earl smiled. “Some people like to think so.” He stood, and Sally followed suit. “Don’t leave the area, Josh. We might need to chat with you again.”

Sally led the way to the car. Once inside, she said, “Interesting interview, Guv. He’s lying about something, though.”

“Yes, he is, but is that something relevant to our case? I’ll let you talk to Carmen, woman to woman. I’ll visit that weasel Crandall again.”

“So, what’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde up to these days?” Carmen Silva said as she placed a plate of biscuits on the kitchen table to accompany the tea.

Sally and Carmen were amiably seated in her little kitchen. The woman had something in common with that operatic Carmen: Sally had heard her singing in the garden when the sergeant had knocked on Carmen’s front door. She also had a husky but lovely contralto voice, and she made a living singing and playing the piano in posh pubs around the area. She’d met Josh in one.

Sally eyed her over her tea cup’s brim. “I’m wondering what you mean by that.”

Carmen laughed. “I don’t know if Josh is bipolar, schizoid, or what, but he can go from being a sweet toff into some dark place in his disturbed mind, and he can become abusive and vicious when that occurs. The last straw was when he pushed me up against that wall over there and practically ripped open my arse, trying to skewer me from behind.” She saw Sally’s startled expression. “Too graphic? I’d think plods would be immune to such violence. In any case, my words can’t begin to describe how awful that was. I reported the assault, and he received a court order to stay away from me. When he showed up here again, I had him arrested. That arse Crandall—what a weasel he is!—then got him off so he only had to do community service.”

“How often would he have those—let’s call them mental fugues?”

“Too often for my taste. I like it a bit rough sometimes—one gets carried away, you know—but he became a savage stranger much too often, so much so that I believe he needs to be institutionalized. He can be bat-shit mad!”

“Enough to rape and kill his own sister?”

Carmen frowned and pondered that question a bit, a telling pause for Sally.

"I don't think his anger would go that far. But he'd lose it with her from what I heard. He'd get angry with her for chatting up the fellers, and he wasn't often his Mr. Hyde persona when that occurred either."

"Did you know Patricia Kensington well?"

Carmen smiled. "Much better than Josh at first. I met Trish before Josh, in fact, but don't tell him that."

"Any particular reason?"

"I'm bi, Sergeant Hill. Imagine how that would go over with Josh. You're cute, by the way, but don't worry. I can tell you're as straight as a ruler."

That little weasel Crandall wasn't happy to see Earl again. Sally had sent him a long text describing her meeting with Carmen Silva.

"I'd like to get your side about the Josh vs. Carmen case, if you don't mind."

The barrister frowned. "A difficult case. A she-said-he-said one, although she had photographic evidence of her injuries he caused with his violence. I managed to convince the jury she was partially to blame because she'd stoked his anger."

Definitely a weasel, Earl thought. He plopped into a chair in front of the desk. "It seems that young man has some anger-management issues."

"Probably not his fault, Inspector. His parents weren't around much during his formative years."

"Not around much now either. Maybe he needs help? Like a psychiatrist's care?"

"I'll tell you only because it's a matter of public record: In addition to requiring community service, he was forced to seek psychiatric help. So was Carmen Silva, for that matter. I don't think it did either of them any good, but at least they're not beating up on each other now."

"Can I have the name of the psychiatrist he visited?"

"That's not in the public record, so I will consider it attorney-client privileged information."

"Okay, but you're not Carmen Silva's attorney, so I could just ask Carmen. My sergeant says she's quite open about discussing the details of the case."

He pondered that and finally nodded. Earl received the name of the court-appointed psychiatrist.

"Ah, those troubled and immature young people," the psychiatrist Dr. Nathan Roberts said, "Carmen, Trish, and Josh."

Roberts was a rotund, balding man dressed in a plaid suit with a polkadot tie that was a bit gaudier than Crandall's. Earl thought he looked like a clown on holiday.

"Trish was your patient?" Sally said, stylus poised over her moby.

"I'd been helping Patricia for a few years. Josh knew it, so we suggested my name to the court, and Carmen came to me as part of the court package. I saw them all separately, of course. I'm sorry I can't talk about Trish. You could look up my report made to the Crown Court, so I can tell you about Carmen and Josh. Actually, no, I won't tell you. I'll just answer your questions but not offer extra information. And I'll only answer questions that are already answered in the report. That wasn't a complete analysis of Carmen and Josh's problems, only enough to satisfy the court. Is that all clear?"

Earl nodded. "Did you make any recommendations?" he said, a bit annoyed with the doctor's meandering and unhelpful discourse.

"Of course. It was what you might expect. I recommended that they shouldn't see each other again because one might try to kill the other. Where couples argue and then have makeup sex, those two would get progressively more violent. I predicted that such behavior would continue and perhaps worsen."

"I see. I suppose you said nothing about Josh's relationship with his sister."

"Off the record, I think he loved her as an older brother should, but he was overly protective of her. He saw her as an immature girl still, with some reason."

"And perhaps he was the immature one?" Roberts demurred. "Were you at the trial of Mike Drummond?" Roberts nodded. "What was your professional opinion of him? Do you think he killed Trish? And was Josh convinced of that?"

"I thought you are after the man who stabbed Charles Barrington, his barrister."

"Maybe Josh did it to frame Mike? Get even, as it were? Could Josh have killed his sister? Did they fight violently too?"

Roberts put his hands up. "Whoa! Too many questions, Inspector. And your job is to answer those questions, not me. And I must say that most anyone can murder someone else if the circumstances are right. We all have violent tendencies because human beings have been competitive since the dawn of time."

"The more violent tendencies there are, the higher the probability of murder, I suppose. Civilized people control those tendencies, but I'll agree that we're in business because some people find that difficult. Like Josh?"

"Not when it came to Trish."

"But maybe for Drummond and Barrington?"

"I'd think more for Drummond than Barrington, as long as you're making extreme conjectures. Why would he go after the barrister?"

"In defending Mike Drummond, maybe Barrington discovered something about Josh that the lad didn't want the world to know?"

"Continuing your wild conjecture, that he was the one who killed Trish?" Earl nodded. "That's absurd, Inspector. Josh is an immature, spoiled brat; so was Trish. But why would either one of them stab their barrister? I'll admit she was the type of woman who would tease a man, chatting him up in her sexy manner, and then pushing him away. It was a game for her, and it would make any potential suitor angry."

"That sounds a bit like violating patient-doctor confidence, Doc," Earl said.

Roberts shrugged. "A slip, a freebie, and I'll deny I said it. Besides, Trish is dead. She no longer has any reputation to defend."

As they drove back to the station, Earl said to Sally, "You know, lass, I can't get my head around this case. No theory, no scenario I can create fits all the facts well. We're missing something,"

"There's your observation that Josh knew that a knife was used on Mr. Barrington. Roberts knew it too. Maybe the psychiatrist told Josh?"

"Bollocks! That's it!" Earl checked traffic and then made a U to go back the way they'd come. "He's the common denominator who ties everything together!"

"Do you mean the psychiatrist? How are you going to prove he killed Charles Barrington?"

“He not only killed Barrington. He killed Patricia Kensington. Remember how he describe what type of woman she was? I’ll bet my guess is correct. In defending Michael Drummond, Charles found out something that incriminated Roberts for Trish’s murder.”

“So, what was he doing at the Kilborn’s house?”

“I never checked, but I’ll bet someone took his call and told him where I was. He was coming to see me.”

“That’s easy to confirm.” Sally got on the blower and discovered that a PC had substituted for the old duty sergeant while the latter hit the loo. He’d then forgotten to tell anyone about Barrington’s call. “Human error. It gets us all too often.”

“Makes no difference now. Call someone to go to Barrington’s office to look at the Drummond file. That’s where we should have started.”

“And where are we going now?”

“To arrest a feckin’ shrink.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“No. We’ll wait in the car park until get confirmation. I think Dr. Roberts forgot that other professionals make copious notes about their client’s cases.”

“Maybe when it came to Patricia Kensington, he wasn’t so calm and professional?”

They sat in the car park for nearly five minutes until a DC called from Barrington’s office. “I had to get Drummond’s permission as well, Guv,” he said. “I assumed you didn’t want to wait for a warrant.”

“Good bloke! Are you giving me a green light, George?”

“Beats me. Barrington made notes about an affair between Trish Kensington and Nathan Roberts but questioned the necessity of bringing it up in the trial to protect the ambassador’s family from more scandal. I guess something changed his mind and wanted to talk to you about it.”

“After Roberts had denied it, I’m guessing. We might have to work to get a conviction here. Thanks for being quick, George.”

“No problem, Guv.”

“He’s with a patient,” the receptionist said after looking at their warrant cards. “You’ll have to wait, detectives.”

“Sorry, Miss, but this is more important than any patient.”

Earl walked right past her, Sally rolling her eyes at the receptionist as a signal she wasn’t responsible for her Guv’s actions. Earl pounded on the office door and then walked right in. He barely glanced at the woman on the psychiatrist’s couch, who made a discreet but hasty retreat.

“Dr. Roberts, you are under arrest for the murders of Patricia Kensington and Charles Barrington.”

The doctor slumped into his office chair. “How did you...”

“Discover your crimes? Easy enough. Josh knew that Charle Barrington was killed with a knife, as was his sister. We never released that first fact, so only Barrington’s murderer could know the MO.” Earl cautioned the psychiatrist and then added, “Hold out your hands, Doc. I need to cuff you.”

“I loved her, Inspector. You have to understand that. But she spurned me. I knew the police would probably find out everything. I deserve my punishment and will accept what’s coming to me.”

“Josh wasn’t the only one with a temper. How did you find out that Barrington had the goods on you?”

“Easily enough. She’d told Charles about the affair. She confessed to that when she died in my arms.”

“Tell me, Nathan, did you rape her before or after she died?”

“I’m no ghoul, Inspector. I forced myself on her right on that couch. When she threatened to tell the police, I stabbed her. I used the same knife on Charles. The second murder is easier than the first, I’m told. It was in my case, but of course I was more desperate.”

“Got that all, Sally?”

She waved her moby. “Of course, Guv. And you cautioned him.”

“You know, Dr. Roberts, for a bloke who’s just supposed to listen to his crazy patients and nod sagely, you sure talk a lot.”

Note from Steve

You have just finished reading *Detectives, Volume Two*, another free PDF featuring some new British sleuths. 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 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
Angels Need Not Apply
Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder
Aristocrats and Assassins
The Collector
Family Affairs
Gaia and the Goliaths
Defanging the Red Dragon*

"Esther Brookstone Art Detective Series"

Rembrandt's Angel
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Death on the Danube
Palettes, Patriots, and Prats
Leonardo and the Quantum Code
Defanging the Red Dragon*
Intolerance**
The Klimt Connection
Celtic Chronicles

"Inspector Steve Morgan Series"

Legacy of Evil
Cult of Evil
Fear the Asian Evil

*A crossover novel, and a free PDF download

**Another novel that's a free PDF download

For more British-style mysteries, see the short-fiction 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 too.) The second two volumes of *Sleuthing, British-Style*, as well as the first volume of *Detectives*, 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 fiction collections, see the "Books & Short Fiction" web page at my website.

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

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

This collection differs from Volume One because it focuses on just one detective, Detective Inspector Earl Wilson, who works out of a substation in the Penrith Police District. Detectives in England's northern counties generally have to cover large areas of beautiful countryside, and Earl's Lake District is no exception. By the same token, they usually don't have to solve a lot of murders—stealing stock and farming equipment are much more common crimes. Earl however has a rash of murder cases to solve, though. To solve them, his DS Sally Hill aids him.

As I was finishing the first story in this collection (there are four, the last never seen before), I thought Sally and Earl might inherit the mantles of Esther and Bastiann from the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series, but Earl seemed a bit old for the job (he's about ready to retire too). I chose Steve Morgan and his team instead. But Earl is still an interesting bloke, and you might see more of him in the future.

Given that these are short stories (some are almost novella-length, though), I don't focus on the CID briefings or relationships among the police personnel. That's all better treated in a novel. Instead, I focus on the crimes and how Sally and Earl go about solving them. That has to be done in all short fiction, as you have seen in most of the fiction that I offer freely to readers. That's the essence of most mystery and crime stories.

I like to write short fiction. It's a great 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 before embarking on full novels. 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 lost on failures. (You only see what I consider successfully completed races.) 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 small gold nuggets among the novelistic gold ingots that readers have access to. (That's alluding again 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 at one time!)

That said, some readers might wonder why I give away so many free PDFs. For the short fiction, which the above stories 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, 2023

SAMPLE

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, his author's website, discusses reading, writing, and the publishing business; and his blog at 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.