



**The Detectives,  
Volume Three  
Steven M. Moore**



**Around the World and to the Stars!  
In Libris Libertas!**

# **The Detectives**

## **Volume Three**

**Six Detectives,  
Seven British-Style Crime Stories**

**Steven M. Moore**

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## Preface

As many of my readers know, I've experimented a lot with writing British-style crime stories and novels. (Two published series of novels and many short stories and novellas are evidence for this activity. Two complete novels and a lot of the short fiction among these free PDF downloads are also among those experiments, and the published collection, *Sleuthing, British-Style*, is available as an inexpensive ebook, as are its sequels that are also available as free PDF downloads.)

Here in these pages I would like to entertain readers with seven more crime stories, the first ones involving four characters from my novels: Esther Brookstone, Clarisse Workman, Carl Hughes, and Harold Gregg. The settings for each short story or novella are as varied as the UK itself. Hopefully, readers will enjoy peeking into these characters' lives a bit more. Esther, of course, has enjoyed starring roles in all nine novels in the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series (as I stated above, two of those novels are also free PDF downloads). Clarisse Workman is the Bristol (Avon and Somerset) PD's DI who had a supporting role in the "Inspector Steve Morgan" trilogy; Carl Hughes also had a supporting role in that trilogy and became a PI at the end of the third novel; and both detectives deserved starring roles in their own stories. And Harold Gregg had cameos in both a Brookstone and Morgan novels. They are all old friends with whom I wanted to spend a bit more time. I hope you do too. (Or, these stories will give you an introduction to them!)

And just for those readers who might be wondering why I don't invent some new characters, I offer Brian Fitzsimmons and Adrian Huxley. Brian is a shorter and slimmer version of Hercule Poirot; he, perhaps even more than Hercule, is the opposite of that famous TV detective, Lieutenant Columbo. He inherits another inspector's sergeant, and the two go about solving a baffling crime mystery.

Adrian is even more like a Columbo-opposite: He's the toff who went against family tradition and became a police detective. As such, he's a critic of English elites who knows what he's talking about. I wanted to include him to show that anyone, even a member of Britain's privileged classes, can opt for a life of combatting crime and protecting its innocent victims.

Note: This free PDF reuses my new cover that highlights published novels in my oeuvre, mostly the first novels that initiate my many series, including those under my pen name A. B. Carolan that I use for YA sci-fi mysteries. In addition, the short fiction pieces in this collection have never been available before, not even in my writer's blog at my author's website, so readers who have downloaded this free collection have a freebie containing completely new material that's not available elsewhere. A complete list of my published novels and other short fiction collections is found at the end of this PDF. Its cover also displays my motto that describes my complete oeuvre. I hope you forgive me for this bit of advertising!

For now, just enjoy these stories...and see why I say King Charlie is lucky to have these six detectives living in his realm, even if they are my imaginary friends and fictional creations!

r/Steve Moore  
Montclair, NJ, 2023

## British, Irish, and Scotch Words and Phrases

Just like the US has Bostonian and Texan dialects, the UK and the Republic of Ireland also have regional dialects. Here I tried to include all expressions not familiar to US readers that appear in these novellas, but I might have missed a few...or included a few extras from previous works? And English and Irish readers, please don't hold it against this Yank if my definitions aren't one hundred percent correct. While I might be responsible for some errors, Google and Microsoft Word were willing accomplices!

### A

aggro—aggravation, discomfort

ANPR—"Automatic Number Plate Recognition" (cameras on major UK roads used to read license plates)

ARO—Armed Response Officer (like a SCO19 member)

ARU—Armed Response Unit (also often called SCO19)

ARV—Armed Response Vehicle (a van carrying an ARU or SCO19)

Auld Reekie—Edinburgh, Scotland

### B

barney—intense argument or verbal skirmish

barrister—lawyer who can participate in a trial

beck—creek, small river

biro—ballpoint pen (named after its inventor)

blaggard—scoundrel

blather—talk, often without rhyme or reason

bloke—fellow, guy

blues and twos—emergency vehicles, or patrol cars in general (for blue lights and two-toned sirens)

bobby—a PC or PS

bollix—bungle

bollocks—general swear word (literally, testicles)

boot—car trunk

brae—a steep bank or hillside

brief—a barrister or solicitor (or the usual meaning)

### C

car park—parking lot (usually seen as two words, but sometimes as one, or hyphenated)

ceilidh—gathering with Gaelic folk music, singing, dancing, and/or storytelling

chap—fellow, guy

chappie—fellow, guy

chat up—flirt

CHIS—Covert Human Intelligence Sources (informants)

chinwag—conversation, discussion

CID—Criminal Investigative Department within a police station

chuffed—pleased

cockup—something done badly or inefficiently; disaster, fiasco

copper—policeman or policewoman

crisps—potato chips

### D

DS—Detective Sergeant  
DC—Detective Constable  
DI—Detective Inspector  
DCI—Detective Chief Inspector  
do an early dart—leave business early  
do a runner—flee, disappear  
donkey’s years—a long time  
dosh—money (wad)  
droll—boring, irrelevant  
duty solicitor—legal representation provided to a suspect by the police or court

## **E**

eejit—fool

## **F**

fag—cigarette  
feckin’—not as strong as the American version, but also used to emphasize  
fiver—five-pound note  
FLO—family liaison officer  
fuggy—warm, stuffy, smoky (of a room, atmosphere, or mind)

## **G**

give stick—beat up, verbally or physically  
gobshite—mean or contemptible person  
gobsmacked—astonished, astounded (a “gob” was a wad of tobacco)  
goolies—testicles  
GP—General Physician  
grass—informant, rat, stoolie (noun); to inform or rat on (verb)

## **H**

hire-car—rental car  
HOLMES—"Home Office Large Major Enquiry System," the UK-wide police database

## **I**

Iron Lady—Margaret Thatcher

## **K**

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

## **L**

do or have a lie-in—sleep late  
loo—bathroom, WC  
lorry—truck  
lose his rag—get furious

## **M**

marra—mate, friend (Cumbrian dialect)  
mash—tea brewed from tea leaves, not tea bags  
mobile—cellphone or smart phone  
monkeys—500-pound notes  
MP—member of parliament

## **N**

nappies—diapers

nick—steal, arrest (verbs); police station, jail (nouns)

niggling—trifling, annoying

nippers—children

numpty—stupid or foolish person

nutter—crazy person

## **O**

old chestnut—adage or saying

## **P**

peckish—hungry

Peel Centre—training institution for the Metropolitan Police (originally only for higher-ranked officers, and called Hendon Police College or Hendon Training College)

pillock—fool

pish-tosh—just a trifle

plonker—fool

plod—copper

PM—prime minister

prat—a stupid or foolish person

PC—patrol constable

PS—patrol sergeant

publican—manager or owner of a pub

punter—bookie, gambler (more British); customer (more Irish)

## **R**

rozzar—copper

rugger—rugby player

## **S**

SCO19—Specialist Crime and Operations group (SWAT group in the US); see ARO, etc. (This term tends to be used more in standard policing, while MI5 and NCA tend to use more the ARO terminology.)

scarper—flee

scrote—lowlife

scrum—disorderly crowd

shite—what you expect, but not considered swearing as such

shop (out)—betray

skelping—unusually large or outstanding

SIO—Senior Investigating Officer

snout—informant (see grass)

SOCO—Scene of Crime Officer (US CSI)

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

solicitor—a lawyer who provides legal representation but can't necessarily appear in a trial

stunner—pretty woman

## **T**

Taff—Welshman

takeaway—fast food the buyer picks up

taking the Mickey—taunting, wisecracking, or being otherwise unreasonable

taking the piss—(see immediately above)



tam—a Scottish hat  
tearaway—urchin  
telly—television  
tipple—imbibe an alcoholic beverage, or the beverage itself  
tippler—habitual drinker  
toe-rag—urchin  
toff—aristocrat, or member of the privileged elites  
top—bobby; PC or PS (for the traditional helmet)  
trainers—sneakers (US East Coast) or tennis shoes (US West Coast)  
trawl—search  
tuck in—more for eating than for going to bed  
twaddle—nonsense  
twit—foolish or stupid person  
twitcher—birdwatcher

## **W**

wag—a person given to droll, roguish, or mischievous humor  
wanker—a contemptible person, scoundrel, villain  
wellies—overshoes  
wing mirror—side mirror of car (as opposed to rearview mirror)  
wrinklies—elderly or older people

## **Y**

yob—rude or aggressive person

## Security Agencies

British national police—the Metropolitan Police System ("the Met" aka "Scotland Yard") and its regional affiliates

British national crime agency—National Crime Agency (NCA)

British internal security—MI5

British external security—MI6

Chinese security—Ministry of State Security (MSS)

French internal security—DGSI

French external security—DGSE

Irish Republic's national police—An Garda Síochána (Gardai or "the Guards")

Russian internal security—FSB

Russian external security—SVR

US internal security—ATF, DEA, DHS, FBI

US external security—CIA, sometimes FBI

Notes:

The Metropolitan Police System, also called “the Met” or “the Yard” (for Scotland Yard, which is often used for both the Met and the City of London Police), and their regional affiliates represent the general policing organization for England and Wales; it covers general crime throughout the region with its many divisions, but it also covers background checks and crimes associated with the Official Secrets Act and railroad terminals and some local airports. Individual cities' police departments are now considered part of the overall system (e.g., Bristol or Reading PD).

Police Scotland was created in 2013 to unify policing in all of Scotland, and it's basically a copy of the Metropolitan Police system with all its own divisions and bureaucracy.

MI5 and MI6 were created during World War II. (The MI stands for “Military Intelligence,” and “Section Five” and “Section Six” are just reduced to the numbers in general parlance.)

The National Crime Agency was also created in 2013 to lead efforts against organized crime, including sex- and drugs-trafficking.

FSB and SVR are the remnants of the old KGB, Putin's old employer.

## Elder Care

[Note from Steve: George Langston, Esther Brookstone's boss when she was an inspector in the Art and Antiques Division of Scotland Yard, chronicled the cases of this intrepid sleuth during her work there and after she retired. He didn't turn them all into novels. This story harks back to the time when Esther Brookstone and Bastiann van Coevorden's relationship was just beginning, around the time of Bastiann's participation in *Aristocrats and Assassins*.]

"What's wrong, Esther?" Interpol agent Bastiann van Coevorden said to Brookstone over the phone. "You seemed a lot more upbeat at the Paris airport."

She could imagine his puzzled expression as he twirled the mustache. That, his build, and three-piece suits would make most people think of the actor who had played Christie's Hercule Poirot so often on the telly. He was Dutch, though, not Belgium.

In contrast, her statuesque figure, curls, and mannerisms weren't those of a Miss Marple, but wags at the yard had started calling her that, partially in admiration of her successes, most of them involving stolen art and the illegal art trade or crimes related to those activities. Most didn't know about her previous life as an MI6 spy during the Cold War.

"Just a bit sad that we couldn't spend more time together. And I called because I just wanted to thank you again for a lovely day. The Louvre always has so much to see, and that picnic lunch on the Champ d'Elysee would have pleased the most demanding gourmet."

"If you can get beyond the irascible Parisians, the 'City of Light' has a lot to offer. I still prefer Amsterdam."

"And I'm sure you'd be a charming guide to the Van Gogh Museum there." She saw the blinking light on the phone. *Bollocks! I can't have any private time!* "Sorry, Bastiann. I've got a call. Let's talk later a bit more intimately, shall we?"

He rang off, and she poked at the blinking button for her other "official line."

"Inspector Brookstone? I'm Tom Vance from Norman, Williams, and Vance, the law firm. George Langston suggested that I ring you."

"Um, you also must convince me as well, not just Chief Inspector Langston, that you have something that concerns our division and not the Yard in general. We're spread rather thin, so I don't want to make things worse for him or me."

"I understand. It's an old missing-person case."

"Not our purview, solicitor, especially if 'old' implies 'cold.' I don't do cold cases. We deal with cases of stolen art and unscrupulous dealers who sell it. Who is this missing person?"

"Rebecca Foxworthy."

Esther knew the name. Foxworthy had been the rage among the critics some ten years or so ago, but Esther thought she'd become a recluse and had stopped painting her wild landscapes, mostly scenes from the Cotswold's filled with mottled skies or menacing clouds. Esther loved the clouds.

"Didn't she get into drugs and then have to go into a rehab facility?"

"She did. She walked out one day, and no one has seen her since. Your colleagues turned it into a cold case. Her personal solicitor wants to declare her deceased. We represent the family, two sons and a daughter to be precise. They believe she's still alive."

"Quite enough lawyers to ensure nothing will ever get done," Esther said with a smile that would be lost on the lawyer. "When you said 'your colleagues,' did you mean people here at the Yard?"

“Yes, Detective Inspector David Thackeray, in particular.”

“Um, I’m sure he had his reasons.” *Maybe laziness?* she thought. *Or just thinking that artists should get decent jobs like everyone else?* Thackeray was an uncultured lout and misogynist. “It’s possible that Rebecca just wanted to get away from all the intrigue. What does her solicitor gain by having a court declare her dead?”

“A settlement with the family and distribution of her remaining assets. They don’t want that.”

“Is there a will?”

“No.”

“That’s a problem. What do they want exactly?”

“To find her. Because Rebecca’s solicitor controls everything, they’re rightfully suspicious.”

“And why do you think I can help you in my capacity here at the Yard, Mr. Vance?”

“You have a good reputation for recovering stolen artwork. Think of all the art that will be in Rebecca’s head just waiting to be put on canvas if she’s still alive.”

Esther smiled. “Maybe she’s been doing exactly that, wherever she is. I’m surprised that argument resonated with Chief Inspector Langston.”

“To be a bit of a gossip, he and his wife are fans of Foxworthy’s paintings, and he doesn’t have a high opinion of Thackeray. Simple as that.”

Esther smiled. George Langston was Thackeray’s opposite—cultured, polite, and soft-spoken, and his wife was a jewel as well.

“I’ll see what I can do. Let me have the phone number and address of your firm.”

Despite her hesitation about getting mixed up in a legal battle, Esther had decided to look at the case. If anything, it would be doing a favor for Langston, so he’d owe her one that she could collect sometime in the future.

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DI Thackeray was an irascible fellow at the best of times. He looked more like a rugger with his broad shoulders and thick torso filling a suit off the racks that didn’t quite match all his proportions. He parted his hair in the middle so that his thick glasses made him look like an overgrown bank clerk who was impersonating Oscar Wilde. A small Hitler-like mustache would remind anyone of a centipede; one was always waiting for it to crawl to some other spot on his face.

Yet Esther sometimes liked the oaf, even respected him, although they’d been at odds at the times they’d previously met. He was good-natured at times, a tippler from the veins on his broad nose, and just possibly a clever fellow at tracking down criminals. But he was also a misogynist, not uncommon in the Yard among the normal coppers working there, but even some in the Art and Antiques Division were secretly against feminist encroachments into their investigations.

She’d accessed his file to see his recent activities at the Yard before going to meet with him. He’d had some recent successes, but if every copper made every case he couldn’t solve into a cold case and didn’t count it as a failure, the number of successes would always be incorrectly biased, wouldn’t it?

“I’m not sure why you’re interested in this case, Inspector Brookstone. People go missing all the time because they drop out of society, leaving spouse and children behind for a younger love and more excitement in the bedroom than they had in their dull life with their spouse and family.”

“Did anyone expect foul play? From what I’ve read, she’d been doing well in rehab.”

“Indeed. Are you suggesting she’s at the bottom of the Thames or thrown overboard into the ocean? We found no body. No sightings of her at all. And her only enemy seemed to be drugs. No wonder her paintings were so wild.”

“Are you suggesting that every painter of wild landscapes or abstract art is taking drugs?”

“Um, not at all. I’m just making a novice’s observation that can be as correct as any experts, including you. We kept the case on the back of the Aga for a year as we queried Europol, Interpol, and the local police in several European countries she’d visited and reportedly favored. I couldn’t justify continuing the case with my superiors, so I had to agree with them to leave it. For every mispers case we solve, ma’am, nine others remain unsolved. Sometimes people just don’t want to be found. No law against that.”

“I see. Do you have any other information about the case, files not mentioned in the database?”

He nodded. “Our notes. Mine and others’. Lists of conjectures and guesses and persons we talked to who often wasted our time. Notes from interviews. My sergeant even talked with a psychologist about Foxworthy’s mental state and possible motives. We more than covered all the bases, I dare say.”

“Possibly true. Could I have a copy of all that? It would give me a running start, Inspector.”

“So, you’re going to open the case again and pursue it?” Esther nodded. “I wish you luck then. We had very little. And it seems your division needs more to do if you folks have so much idle time on your hands that you can spend it on a cold case.”

She laughed. “We work in mysterious ways sometimes, but we work diligently. I for one only give up on a case if I absolutely must. Better said, I don’t like cold cases. They give the Yard a bad reputation. Good day, sir.”

He made a face, and Esther could imagine his angry eyes upon her as she left his office.

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Esther spent several days reviewing what Thackeray and others had done on Rebecca Foxworthy’s case. She then revisited two key individuals: the daughter, who seemed to be leading the family’s efforts to find Rebecca; and the woman at the rehab center who last saw the artist.

Clarisse Randall nee Foxworthy was a frumpy and matronly lady with a bubbly personality that Esther thought belied an innate and self-serving slyness. She was a gossip columnist, a profession that might not have set well with the famous artist. As such, she had to move in a man’s world, so Esther decided to give her the benefit of doubt for playing the role of a silly woman. Or maybe that play-acting was necessary to put the rich and famous at ease.

“I’m not sure what an inspector from the Yard’s Art and Antiques division can do to help us find my mother,” Clarisse said over tea. She’d served as mother and clearly had a lot of practice doing it. “We believe that a crime has been committed, Inspector Brookstone, and it has nothing to do with her art but her money.”

“Indeed. And who of you believes that?”

“Our lawyer, Mr. Vance, my two brothers, and I. That awful Inspector Thackeray didn’t believe it for one minute, but we immediately wrote him off as a buffoon.”

“He listened to you and your family and came to the decision that your mother left rehab and doesn’t want to be found. She was well-travelled. She could have ended up anywhere. I can’t. Not without a solid lead, Mrs. Randall.”

“I wouldn’t defend that bastard if I were you.”

“I’m not defending him, and I’ll leave defending your family to your brief, Mr. Vance. I only summarized what Mr. Thackeray left in the case records. I need more than your lawyer and family’s criticism of his work.”

“You plods are all alike.”

“That’s not true. Mr. Thackeray wouldn’t know a Foxworthy painting from a child’s finger-painting. I can look at one and determine if it’s a fake, where and why she used burnt umber and other oils in different spots on the canvas, and whether the brush strokes indicate her early or later period. I also know that some people just want to be left alone.” Esther paused for breath, realizing that she indeed was repeating what Thackeray had said, and then asked, “Who was the person who committed her to rehab, Mrs. Randall.”

Clarisse frowned. “That would be me. My older brothers washed their hands of her. She got to the point where she said she couldn’t be motivated to paint without her drugs, but they turned her into more of a raging bitch that turned off her agent among many others.”

“And I suppose Mr. Vance sorted the legal maneuvers necessary for her commitment?”

“For a price. That prat always has his hand out for more money. He in fact suggested the family declare her incompetent. I wanted none of that. My mother isn’t incompetent. She’s a nutter, like many artists, I suppose, but not incompetent.”

“Clearly not, if she’s smart enough to hide from the rest of the family and your lawyer, as well as fool the rehab staff.” *I have to admire the old woman, to be honest. She has certainly earned her freedom as long as she’s okay.* “I’m a bit fuzzy about the details regarding the latter.”

“You’ll have to consult with that staff, Mrs. Brookstone. We can’t.”

“Why not?”

“We sued the rehab establishment, of course.”

*Of course, Esther thought. It’s always about money.*

Esther decided she didn’t like Clarisse. *Will her brothers be equally difficult?*

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Esther couldn’t talk with the brothers. Both were out of the country, and a few calls to America and Singapore not only confirmed that but also that their sister had been left with the problem of finding their mother. To put a fine point on it, they refused to talk to Esther, so she decided to visit the rehab facility.

In person, Dr. Alan Peabody reminded Esther of Rowan Atkinson CBE aka Mr. Bean, a silly man on the telly screen who took himself far too seriously off it. The doctor used palms on desk to launch himself towards her, righting himself just in time to offer a hand to shake.

“Welcome to Green Leas, Mrs. Brookstone.”

The name was better than the facility because it was a rundown tip masquerading as a rehab establishment, both outside and in. *No wonder Foxworthy did a runner!* Esther had to wonder if most of the NHS funding went to line Dr. Peabody’s pockets.

“It’s Esther if I can call you Alan; otherwise, it’s Miss Brookstone—I never took any of my husband’s last names, even though one was an Italian count—or you can call me Detective Inspector Brookstone, because that’s what I am.” She sat. “As I said on the phone, I’m here about Rebecca Foxworthy’s disappearance.”

“My, my, her family does have clout, I dare say, convincing a Scotland Yard Inspector to scout out the enemy camp. I’m afraid I can’t say much without our solicitor present. We’re being sued, and I don’t know which side you’re on.”

"I'm not on any side except perhaps Rebecca's. I don't represent the family, Alan, nor Green Leas, nor even the NHS whose inspections of this facility obviously don't occur often enough or fail miserably. Consider my visit a follow-up on the investigation that Inspector Thackeray and his minions performed regarding Rebecca's disappearance."

"Which led to nothing. All I can say is that Rebecca simply went for a walk around the grounds, as she often did, and then disappeared. We immediately reported her disappearance to her daughter, who represents the family and brought her here for rehabilitation."

"Is this establishment successful, Alan? What's your recidivist ratio?"

"We have an eighty-eight percent success rate while our patients are here. Unfortunately, some succumb to the temptation of alcohol or drugs again once they leave, especially if their families are unsupportive."

"What about Rebecca's family?"

"We never got to that point. Ms. Foxworthy was clean during her last days here before she disappeared."

"Was she painting again?"

"As a matter of fact, she was. We have several unfinished oils stored away in case she ever returns."

"Shouldn't the family have those?"

"Ms. Foxworthy didn't want any of her children to know that she was even painting again. I suppose that will come out in the lawsuit if the judge doesn't throw the case out for being frivolous, which it is, of course. We don't run one of the Queen's prisons here, after all."

"Perhaps she thought of it in that way. I certainly would."

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Esther was about ready to admit defeat. She decided she needed to talk to the solicitor in person now that the lawsuit could be part of the discussion. She couldn't quite decide which side would benefit more from Rebecca's continued disappearance, but after seeing the state of the rehab facility, it was obvious that if the family won, they wouldn't get much for their efforts.

The honorable Mr. Vance's PA walked Esther down the hall and into the solicitor's office. She disappeared, he stood, and they shook hands. "Would you like some refreshments, Inspector Brookstone?"

"Thank you, but I'm fine, Mr. Vance. Please don't let me stop you, though."

He sighed. "I can't do coffee or tea without biscuits, madam, so I shan't. As one ages, one must control the waistline."

"It's partly age and partly heredity, Mr. Vance. My immediate family are all tall and thin like I am. But let's get down into the weeds. Why didn't you say you have launched a lawsuit against the rehab facility? I doubt that they had anything to do with Rebecca Foxworthy's escape, at least intentionally, although I'll admit their security is abysmal. And no, you can't quote me. Besides, it's in such a sorry state, that your thirty percent of the proceeds or so from the lawsuit will be hardly enough to pay for your three-martini lunch."

"Your qualifying phrase is the crux of the matter. Their security is abysmal." He smiled a sly smile. "And the government's pockets are deep—the NHS's, to be specific. It's named in the suit."

"I see. So, in effect, taxpayers like me will be paying to enrich you and Rebecca's family." Vance shrugged, and Esther recalculated. "Was she confined to that facility?"

He looked embarrassed. "Not in so many words. It was understood, though."

“Was there any part of the care contract with the family that expressed confinement had been requested? I understood her presence there was completely voluntary, despite Clarisse’s pushiness.”

He demurred. “That was Rebecca’s point of view, I suppose. The family argued that she needed to be free of drugs, and she agreed.”

“Um, if I were you or the judge, I’d consider the case frivolous. But you won’t be the barrister, I suppose. No matter who wins, the lawyers will get rich at the expense of the taxpayers. No wonder mental health services in the UK are in such a sorry state.”

“I fail to see that your complaints that are a mere reflection of your inability to find Rebecca Foxworthy will accomplish much, madame.”

“Neither will a frivolous lawsuit, sir. I’ll be sure to put this all in my report to put your firm on the defensive.”

“You can’t do that!”

“What? Put facts in my report? I’m a detective, Mr. Vance. What goes into my reports are facts. Others decide whether to prosecute, usually Crown’s Prosecution Service. This whole affair badly reeks, and poor Rebecca seems to be more of a victim than any of her family or the rehab facility. Have a good day, Mr. Vance.”

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Esther met Ambreesh Singh in a coffee bar not far from the building MI5 rented. She’d already visited the loo and stripped off the wire she’d worn. When he sat opposite her, she handed the whole device to him.

She had met him only recently. He was a super-smart techie and a true gentleman. Moreover, he was patient with her. His only problem was that he worked for MI5. That meant that his turn-around time for generating relevant information for her could be slow at times. Naturally his work at MI5 came first.

She could exploit his many skills with impunity, though, because his boss, Jeremy Brand, had been her handler when she was an MI6 agent in Berlin during the Cold War. Jeremy was a good bloke, and he owed her a lot of favors in her mind’s eye, if only because he’d sent her into the hell that was East Berlin on several occasions, and she’d survived. And, in doing so, she’d made him look good.

“I didn’t get much dirt on the family, their lawyer, or the rehab facility, but you spooks don’t need as much data to act as we coppers do. Maybe there’s enough to motivate an examination into Rebecca’s finances or her family and lawyer’s management of them.”

He shrugged. “I’ll look at it. I assume you learned nothing about the artist’s whereabouts?”

“The niggles are there that suggest to me that one, she’s okay, and two, she doesn’t want to be found. That piques my curiosity more. I’m going to have Interpol snoop around a bit on the continent.”

“A favor from Bastiann van Coevorden?”

“You know too much about me, Mr. Singh.”

“I have eyes and ears, Miss B. You use Bastiann and Jeremy, and they use you. The world of art thieves and stolen artwork goes beyond the UK, and the playground of all three of you is international.”

“Um, Bastiann and Jeremy do more than worry about art thieves and stolen artwork.”

He smiled. “So, you use them more than they use you?”



“You make it sound so tawdry. They’re just good friends. Good friends do favors for other friends.”

“I think Bastiann is more than a friend.”

“He might become more than a friend, I’ll admit. Jeremy is more a lost cause, I think, and he had his chance and blew it. Follow up on the finances and do what suits your fancy. I’ll be making a call to Bastiann tonight. How’s the family?”

“Time-consuming. My wife wants to quit her job.”

“Don’t let her. Hire a nanny. Get a relative to help. She needs to stay independent. The economy won’t be getting any better. I have a premonition that all that *Glasnost* will be for naught, and the Chinese will become more of nasty nuisances, especially with Hong Kong and Taiwan. We might just survive here in the UK if we can get a decent PM.”

“The future encapsulated?”

She smiled. “If you vote Labour, you can’t help being a pessimist.”

“Um, be careful, Esther. Greed can make people do bad things.”

“Those people are mostly greedy old men. My solution is to kick them in the goolies. Am I paying?”

“I believe it’s your turn, yes.”

She put down a note and stood. “Say hi to your wife. I need to call her sometime and give her some advice.”

“About me?”

“And other people. Certainly not about babies. I know nothing about how to handle the little buggers. They’re cute, but cuteness is overrated. Every damn baby’s cute in my eye.”

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Days later, Esther received some surprising results from both Ambreesh and Bastian van Coevorden. On the sly, most of Rebecca Foxworthy’s financial assets had been turned into cash and used to create several new bank accounts in Switzerland. Esther laughed because she assumed no one in the family nor the family’s lawyers knew about them. Rebecca was probably alive and well and had taken the family’s greed and turned it against them. *You sly old lady*, Esther thought. *But where are you hiding?*

Bastiann partially answered that question: A high-end clothier in Milan had been robbed. The clients in the store had been held at gunpoint while thieves packed up designer items. Among the shoppers in the store was Rebecca Foxworthy, still recognizable even with the new haircut and dye job. She was standing by a man with silvery hair and a Roman nose, not an unusual sight in that northern Italian city. *Do I know your companion?* Esther’s question became.

While Esther was certain that Rebecca didn’t want to be found by anyone, but especially by her family and their lawyers, her curiosity was piqued. She no longer was interested in finding Rebecca for them, or even revealing that she was alive, but she wanted to meet the woman behind the art to satisfy her own curiosity. She would have to take some time off and fly to Milan. That would give her a bit of playtime with Bastiann as well!

Esther had a light dinner at her flat, packed a suitcase, and took an Alitalia flight from London to Milan the next morning. After checking into a small but comfortable hotel she knew, she called Bastiann van Coevorden. She had to leave him a message. *What does one do to kill some time in Milan?* she asked herself. Remembering the upscale store corresponding to the wardrobe thieves’ heist suggested the answer: One goes shopping!

There were some people, especially Italians, who thought that Milan was a fashion capital. It had always been an artistic and industrial one, the first more for the *Teatro alla Scala*

on *Via Filodrammatici* made famous by its conductor Toscanini and composers Verdi and Puccini than anyone from the fashion industry. For fashion, Esther preferred Paris. She would rank even London and New York City higher as well, even though her last husband, that romantic prince of a man who would have been called an Italian count in the 1800s but made his millions as a Swiss banker, often did business in Milan more than in Paris.

But Milan, like London and Paris, had fashion shows, and where such runway events were held, there were fashion models. As a young girl in Hull, Esther had admired those models and wanted to be one, something she hid from her parents, of course, especially from her father the vicar. When she finally had the womanly figure that might have given her a chance in that competitive profession, she'd instead put it to use as a spy in East Berlin.

That figure now attracted salesclerks eager to help an apparently rich older woman find just the right dress. In the middle of those recurring little dramas during which she portrayed a fickle British lady, Bastiann made his appearance.

"I'm sure one of your many suitcases will have more elegant dresses than any of the ones you've looked at," he said in German.

She blew him a kiss. "One suitcase, one elegant dress, just in case. Some nice pumps too, dear Bastiann."

Her answer had been in German as well. Although, as any seasoned operative could see, they clearly knew each other, the clerks most likely would only know Italian and a smattering of English. Switzerland was nearer than Austria, and English was the commercial language of the EU. She had, of course, just followed Bastiann's lead, her question about his desire for secrecy would have to wait until they were alone: *Has he learned something more about Rebecca?*

"Let's find a busy coffee bar where we can talk," she said.

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Once sorted, she with a latte and he with a double espresso, she asked her question. "What more have you learned?"

"That your obsessions might be the death of me some day?"

"You know what I mean."

He sighed. "While I'll likely get into trouble for this—Langston never made a formal request to Interpol, after all—we've determined that she's staying at villa in Tuscany. We don't believe she's being held captive at that villa, though."

"Who owns that villa?"

"Some holding company in Grand Cayman."

"That sounds ominous. Are you sure she's okay?"

"To all appearances, yes, it would seem that's the case."

"We must visit that villa to confirm that."

"I expected you to say that, hence my comment about obsessions. To put a fine point on it, I'm prepared. I have a hire-car. We'll pick up your luggage. If everything is satisfactory with Foxworthy's status, we can at least spend a night or two in Tuscany."

"Ah, my Bastiann. So practical, prim, and proper like Hercule Poirot, yet so romantic like my last husband."

"I just look like the actor who played Poirot so often, David Suchet." He twirled his mustache. "As for the latent romantic, I'm half-French, remember. And the other half is Dutch, not Belgium. And I'm definitely not an Italian count."

"Technically, he wasn't either. Noble titles were eliminated by the Italian government. He was just a very smart Swiss-Italian banker. You shouldn't be jealous of him, Bastiann."

“No, I’m thankful. If my luck holds, I’ll manage to know you a lot longer than he did.”

“That’s a bit crude. And my obsessions?”

“Everyone has flaws, Esther.”

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They had just checked into their room in the inn near the villa when Esther’s ringtone sounded.

“Contessa Sartini?” said the voice at the line’s other end.

She listened to the rest, hung up, and then turned to Bastiann. “I think it’s time to take a little drive, Bastian. To that villa.”

“Do I have to change?”

“I don’t think so. He seemed very insistent. He called me Countess Sartini, and I think he disguised his voice.”

“Perhaps we need police backup?”

“No, but bring your gun along just in case.”

Esther let Bastiann continue to drive. Although it was only a short distance from their inn to the villa, he was more accustomed to driving on the wrong side of the road—relative to England, of course—and she wanted to visually savor the beauty of the Tuscan scenery. It was also a distraction, so she’d not think of the possible danger that awaited them.

In fact, the trip was much too short, and they were soon driving along the gravel entrance road that ended in front of the villa.

“Not a terrible spot to inspire the creation of some masterpieces,” the Dutchman said as he parked where centuries earlier carriages and curricles of the locals bound for a party at the villa might have parked.

Back then, the crenelated stone towers standing silent watch under the blue skies where wispy white clouds played tag would have bonfires atop to guide the guests to the festivities. There would be joyful greetings and clapping of the hands to call for a stableman that would have created a percussive background to the strains of country music that escaped through the large open doors leading to an interior garden. Now there was only silence in those Tuscan vineyards and surrounding hills.

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An older bloke could be seen walking towards them, a hand outstretched in greeting. As he came close, he gave barely a nod to Bastiann and the hand became an embrace and hug for Esther. He then stood back and admired her.

“You haven’t changed one bit, Esther,” he said, finally shaking hands with Bastiann. “And this is Interpol agent Bastiann van Coevorden, I presume. Rebecca and I would love to invite you to have pre-dinner cocktails with us on the rear veranda. We can take a more direct route there by walking around the house instead of winding our way through its maze of narrow corridors. It’s an old, traditional villa.”

“I wouldn’t mind the latter, Count Leonardo, if you don’t mind. It’s a lovely old house, and perhaps you can explain some of its history?”

While wondering about Esther’s familiarity with their host, that man smiled as he dipped his chin after probably feeling pride at what Esther had just said. *Is he the real owner?*

“It would be my pleasure, madame. Rebecca also fell in love with it.”

By the time they reached the veranda and its view of the extensive vineyards and hills beyond, Bastiann could understand how Rebecca Foxworthy must have felt seeing the place for

the first time. He knew Esther would too. For someone who voted Labour, she was partial to the finer things in life.

As they'd followed Leonardo through the interior's maze, catching glimpses of spacious old rooms and period furnishings, Bastiann whispered to Esther, "Why do I have this feeling that Leonardo and you are old friends?"

"Don't be jealous, Bastiann,"

"I'm not jealous, just curious. It's the detective in me."

"Hush. He might hear us. He's a sly old fox, Leonardo. And I was right about that call. He'd disguised his voice using a wet handkerchief, I imagine."

"Wet handkerchief?"

"Hush."

The woman waiting for them on the veranda turned to face them. The missing Rebecca Foxworthy smiled and said, "*Benvenuto alla Villa da Ponte Vecchio, Contessa Sartini. You too, Monsieur van Coevorden.*"

Bastiann made a little bow and then looked from one stranger to the other. He recognized Rebecca, of course, but he'd met Leonardo for the first time.

She laughed. "I go by Inspector Brookstone now. We've come to discuss your family situation."

"Of course. I realize that. They're always meddling in my affairs. It's my duty to convince you two that there's nothing really to discuss. I've prepared these for you to take to them."

Esther examined the photos, and then handed them to Bastiann. "Are you ill, Rebecca?"

The artist laughed and winked at Leonardo. "Just ask the love of my life if I'm ill. Perhaps sick with love for him and his lovely property, but quite healthy enough to change my life around. I don't need drugs to get a high now or to become motivated to paint. Or to forget my damn family."

"Yes, Inspector," Leonardo said, "she is very much alive and keeps me busy days and nights. We've both waited decades for this chance."

"But I want you to tell my family that I'm dead, and the photos will be evidence for that. You can use them for proof, and that should be the end to their meddling."

"And all your wealth and properties?" Bastiann said.

"We can provide a death certificate as well," Leonardo said. "They're welcome to anything and everything they can find."

"They won't find much, will they?" Bastiann said.

Rebecca's smile was a sly one. "Not any more than they already have, I'd guess. Leo used to work for America's CIA. He knows a thing or two about secrets."

"Esther knows that," Leonardo explained to Bastiann. "She worked for—"

"Let's leave it at that," Esther said. She nodded to Bastiann. "Let's say we had a few business meetings in East Berlin once upon a time."

"And now that that's all out of the way," Rebecca said, "shall we share some aperitifs and sample the villa's marvelous wines?"

"Excellent," Bastiann said, ever the refined gentleman who knew when to let things in the past stay there.

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Esther entered George Langston's office, the same one that had been hers until she'd become tired of the Yard's misogynistic and political intrigues and squabbles—not George's

fault at all but due to coppers like Thackery and others. She took a seat without being invited to do so. She'd once been the boss of the man sitting across from her, after all.

He closed a folder and looked up at her. "Why do I have this premonition that I'm not going to like your report?"

"You won't like the formal and official one. That's for the family and their lawyer."

"You've lied about the results, have you?"

"Lies of omission. Officially, I didn't succeed. I didn't find the Rebecca Foxworthy who entered that rehab facility." Her smile was a sly one. "Between you and me, though, I did find a new Rebecca Foxworthy, a rejuvenated one. She's alive and well and enjoying life with her Italian count who was her first love and only love. She did her duty, George. Married well, raised her children, and supported everyone with her artwork. Dutiful to her family and her husband to the end, she deserves some happiness in her life now."

"Do I know this man? You say he's a count? That's a bit too close to home, isn't it?"

"You don't know him, and yes, he's a count in the same way my fourth husband was. I knew him well enough decades ago. Back then I thought he might be gay. He never responded well to my many charms."

"I suppose his heart belonged to Rebecca Foxworthy."

"For decades. And vice versa."

"Unlike your husband. You've said at times you had too little time with him."

"My count died. This count suffered for many years, as did Rebecca."

"Yes, that's a major difference, I suppose. What about the lawsuit?"

She arched an eyebrow. "I'd suggest that it's not the business of Scotland Yard to meddle in that, George. That rehab facility really is a tip, and the government, meaning NHS, should either improve it or close it."

"You didn't say that in your report, I hope?"

"Of course not. We work for the government, after all, and we both know how much of the taxpayers' money they manage to waste."

## The Voice

[Note from Steve: You met DI Clarisse Workman in the “Inspector Steve Morgan” trilogy. Although her role becomes more important throughout that trilogy, I felt she deserved a starring role as well, so I wrote this story. Enjoy.]

DI Clarisse Workman studied the body dangling from the barn’s rafter. “I don’t buy it,” she said to her sergeant and bagman, recently promoted DS Ralph Evans. “No chair, stool, whatever to stand on. How the hell did he hang himself?”

Ralph nodded. “Good trick if that’s what happened, I dare say.”

“You’ll have to wait for me to confirm that,” said Dr. Genevieve Graham, otherwise known as Ginny, as she put down her bag of tools. The old pathologist put her hands on her hips and stared at the swinging body too. “Reminds me of that case where the woman was nailed to the folly.”

That case had stumped many officers in Clarisse’s substation, including her rival, Steve Morgan, and eventually reminded quite a few of cults like Koresh, Jones, and Manson’s. Clarisse didn’t want to be reminded of that version that had occurred previously. She considered herself the senior DI at her substation, but Morgan, the newer DI who’d transferred from the Met had run the case. She didn’t have the experience he’d brought from the Yard. She’d learned to live with that and get along with that DI.

She was a statuesque woman who could pass as an ex-track star—in good shape for her age and a good leader for her team. Her ubiquitous head scarf was her only nod to her religion. Being a black woman in what was still a male-dominated profession made life hard at times, but she’d always battled that with determination and enthusiasm. Being a Muslim now only caused some curiosity among the troops. The dreadlocks tumbling out from under the scarf were representative of the other physical flags among the verbal ones she often waved in front of the old, prejudiced bulls in the station and elsewhere.

Ralph was an older copper and was all business. He didn’t care about gender, skin color, or religion. He just expected everyone to do their job and made sure he did his. His recent promotion from detective constable to detective sergeant had been long overdue. The two worked well together and were good friends at work and even social gatherings.

Clarisse glanced at Ginny. “There are no signs of other violence?”

“I’ll tell you if that rope was the only COD after I get him on my mortuary table. Where are those damn SOCOs? I’ll need them to get the victim down without contaminating the evidence.”

“Probably held up in traffic. Ralph and I live nearby, as do you. We’ll take a quick look around and then leave you to meet and greet those old *CSI* fans.”

Ginny indicated the interior of the old barn with the sweep of a hand. “Booties and gloves, officers! This whole place is a damn crime scene. Thank God it’s dry in here and the barn hasn’t been used in donkey’s years.”

With the humidity outside, it smelled that way too; it was pouring. A storm had blown in from the Irish Sea into the Bristol area. Putting on booties wouldn’t be easy because everyone was in wellies.

They followed the pathologist’s orders, and Clarisse and Ralph soon were doing their walk-around. The old building was basically a shell. Stalls had sagged and fallen; and boards were missing in the outside walls, not that the gaps allowed much light in with the terrible weather.

The barn had been cleaned out because the small farm was on the market. They'd seen the "For Sale" sign at the entrance to the property. Ralph had noted the name of the estate agent; it wasn't anyone they knew.

"I'll tell the SOCOs to trace that rope," Clarisse yelled over to Ginny. "I don't think it was left here. Looks too new."

They soon were on their way back to home base.

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Their first problem was to ID the victim. There were no personal documents in the man's pockets. They might have to wait for DNA comparisons with other databases because neither DNA nor fingerprints were in HOLMES; in other words, he'd never been arrested. A query to the military confirmed he'd never served there either.

PCs and DCs started a house-to-house, not an easy task because houses and farms were thinly spread in that area of the Bristol conurbation. But one PC got a bit of a clue in a small grocery located in a small village shopping mall.

"I'm not absolutely certain," the female clerk had said to the PC, "but I think he's the bloke who comes in sometimes." She didn't know his name and told the PC he wasn't all that friendly.

The PC had shown her a description along with a facial. "How tall was your shopper?"

"Um, about your height without the helmet."

The PC was five-eleven; the victim was five-ten. Close enough. "And did he pay with a credit or bank card?"

"Always cash, officer." She was pondering something, so the PC waited. "Brown hair, blue eyes, some purple bird tattooed on the left arm above the wrist. Maybe a limp."

Her description matched the victim well enough, so Clarisse said, "Did this clerk see from which direction he came? Or know where he lives?"

"She has no idea, Guv. Didn't even know how he got there, but she presumed he walked."

"No obvious vehicle then?" The PC shook his head in the negative. "Okay, thanks. Good work. Stick with it, Rodney. We'll find out who this swinger is."

"I heard he's not one, Guv. Someone made it look like suicide."

She smiled. "News travels fast around here. They botched that job. Carry on."

After he left, she went to Ralph's little office, a closet compared to Clarisse's, which wasn't that large either. The other DI had a roomier one. She told her sergeant what the PC had found.

"Could be a local then. There are cottages sprinkled all around that area. Lots of them, some on small farms, others clustered in little enclaves and once used by farm laborers decades ago."

"Then his residence will probably be a needle lost in many haystacks."

"We could start out in that little shopping center and move out to sweep larger and larger circles. Time consuming, I dare say."

"We need other options," Clarisse said. "Someone else must have seen him." Ralph's phone rang, so she just relaxed a moment while he talked.

"'Twas the vicar at St. John's," Ralph said. He saw her expression. "Aye, I know. You're not that familiar with the churches around there."

"I'm Muslim, so I'm not that familiar with Christian churches anywhere in the Bristol area, just mosques." That brought back memories of an attack some domestic terrorists had made

against a mosque not far from the station. That became her case, and it had then blossomed into a much bigger one.

Ralph ignored the comment because he knew about her Islamic heritage. “It’s a small church about two miles from the grocery. The vicar said he heard from a parishioner about the victim. The parishioner gave him a description and showed the vicar the photo we’ve been circulating. He thinks our victim is Douglas Perlmutter.”

She frowned. “From the name, not a parishioner then.” The name was Jewish.

“They’ve walked together sometimes. He can’t be sure, though. He uses sunglasses when he walks, leaving his regular glasses at home.”

“At least we have a possible name. Let’s find out where this Doug Perlmutter lives, and we’ll visit his abode.”

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David Perlmutter lived in a Council cottage in one of the little enclaves about equidistant from the church and grocery. Ralph drove. On the way there, Clarisse used her mobile to fill the little EV with the music from Labrinth; it was a favorite playlist of her favorite singer and composer’s most famous songs.

“I guess you don’t want to talk about the case, Guv,” Ralph said over the music.

She turned it down. “It’s my way of dealing with frustration. These roads wind around a lot. I feel like we’re going in circles.”

“Wait until we get to the enclave. Rumor is that the employers built them that way so the employees wouldn’t get so stinking drunk.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“If they were too tipsy, they’d never find their way home, seeing as how the roads wind around and the cottages all look the same, so they’d learn the lesson and not drink so much.”

“And people complain about Big Brother now.”

With that bit of trivia out of the way, she returned to her playlist. But Ralph knew his way, and they soon arrived.

“Not that walkable to the grocery or church in winter,” Clarisse observed as they sat in the carpool’s EV in front of Perlmutter’s cottage. “No driveway. No car either. Garden looks like hell—no typical English pride there—and the house needs some upkeep too. What are the Council regs?”

“Loose ones, Guv. It’s like having a perpetual low-cost mortgage in these cottages. No lease and no real responsibility of ownership.”

“I suppose David was on the dole too. No job?”

“Could be. We can check. Or, he might have inherited a bit of something or an allowance from his parents. We don’t know that much about him yet.”

“Only that he’s dead. Someone murdered him and failed to make it look like suicide.”

“Shall we knock on the door?”

“And be welcomed by his ghost?”

“That would be Marley, Guv.”

Even though it was about Christmas, she thought *A Christmas Carol* was Dickens’s best work, although she’d liked *Tale of Two Cities* as well. Some of her schoolmates, the Jews and the Muslims, hadn’t liked being forced to read what they considered to be Christian indoctrination, but she hadn’t been into that kind of rebellion.



They went to the porch—it and the walk were covered with wet leaves that had blown in from somewhere—and paused. The house seemed deserted. Had Perlmutter been the only occupant?

“After you, Hulk. We know he’s not home, and you can break down the door more easily than I can.”

Being a practical fellow, Ralph tried the knob first. The door opened. They glanced at each other and then put on booties and gloves once again. Ralph then opened the door wide.

“While this place is a tip, I don’t think he usually lived this rough,” she said. “The inside’s a mess!” They did a walk-around. The place had been tossed. “Someone was looking for something.”

“Maybe after David wouldn’t tell him where it was?” Ralph pointed to a small blood stain on the sitting room’s rug. “I’m guessing that’s our victim’s. He died here. This is the principal crime scene.”

“Ginny might have evidence that will confirm that. It’s from a wound. We’ll match the DNA in the blood too. But are you as certain as I am?”

“Indeed, but it all seems sloppy. How could the killer even begin to hope to disguise a murder as suicide with all the evidence here in this cottage?”

“Maybe he assumed we wouldn’t be here because we had no ID.”

“I’ll call Ginny and the SOCOs.”

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There wasn’t much more they could do at the cottage except wonder what Perlmutter’s killer had been looking for, so they returned to the station. Ralph went to his little office to track down details about the victim’s life while Clarisse wanted to read through Ginny’s full report that they’d just received, although it only had a partial DNA analysis more akin to what one could get on some ancestry-chasing website. It contained traces of someone in addition to Perlmutter, so that would help later if they ever found a suspect.

She’d just seen that the COD was an overdose of barbiturates when her office phone rang.

“Hello, Detective Inspector Workman. Congratulations. I see that my ruse wasn’t successful. I apologize. I was in a hurry, you see. Let me warn you to back off, though. You’re way out of your league. And one would think that you of all people would have loved my handiwork. Don’t Muslims always want to see more dead Jews?” There was a *click!* and then a dial tone.

Clarisse immediately dialed the IT department’s extension. “I just had a call on my office phone. Can you trace it?”

“I’ll get right back to you, ma’am.”

Clarisse hung up. She wasn’t hopeful about the trace. She’d obviously been talking to Perlmutter’s killer! She dashed over to Ralph’s office and stood in the doorway.

“He called!”

“Who, Guv?”

“David Perlmutter’s killer.”

After learning about the call, Ralph suggested she come in and sit.

“I think this is just a distraction,” he said. “He might want us to think this is a hate crime.”

“We don’t know that, and I’m not sure it isn’t after listening to him. I agree that tossing Perlmutter’s house implies something else, but clearly he knows too much about me. I don’t

broadcast my ethnic background or religion, not that I'm much of a practicing Muslim. My parents were, but not my siblings and I, not so much."

"I'm aware of that. It suggests that he might have access to our personnel records."

"I've kept facts like that out of mine. Not even my birth name, which was legally changed by my parents. My father became Richard and my mother Ruth, and we all changed our surnames to Workman. That was my father's idea; he'd been bullied by some rowdy soldiers."

Ralph nodded. "You didn't have to tell me that, but thank you for doing so. I always wondered. In any case, it's no concern of mine. And I'm sticking to my theory that the call was a distraction. Do you agree?"

"What about if it was an attempt to rattle me. He succeeded, but only for a moment." Her mobile rang. "Yes, I'm in Ralph's office. Sorry about that. Any joy?" She nodded as she listened. "Okay, thanks." She frowned. "No luck with the trace. Not surprising. Too short a call, and the phone was a cheap store-bought mobile. A pay-as-you-go. And it's offline now."

"Our trace-back system is good when it works, but it often doesn't. Those cheap phones make it a waste of funds for the most part."

"They have a recording of the conversation, though. I'll receive a copy soon. I want you to listen to it."

They waited. Three minutes later they heard the *ping!* on her mobile. She played back the call.

"No attempt to disguise the voice, so he's not somebody we know," Ralph said.

"Right after the word 'handiwork,' did you hear that noise in the background?"

"Turn up the volume and play it again." She did. "Sounds like a ship's foghorn."

"He's calling from one of the docks!"

"Don't get excited, Guv. The port's large, and a lot of people work there."

"I know that, but maybe Perlmutter worked in that area and not in the area around the old barn."

Ralph nodded. "Could be, but all we can conclude is that his killer called from that area. Hell, he could even be a colleague from one of the urban stations."

"Or a university employee. Perlmutter too. The university is also downtown and not far from the docks compared to our substation."

"How are we going to get enough help to check all those possibilities, Guv?"

"We're not, not until we have more information. For now, our best bet still is to find out why Perlmutter's house was tossed and why he was killed. It's likely that the killer either grew up around here or lives here now and works downtown."

"Probably more than half the Bristol population fit that description."

She sighed. "This is damn frustrating."

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There were a few things in David Perlmutter's attic that the SOCOs returned with and made it into evidence. Three old scrapbooks caught Ralph's eye, and Clarisse and he began to peruse them, looking for any clues about the victim's life.

"Here's something intriguing," Ralph said after more than an hour. "I just used some translation software on it. Still a challenge because the ink had run a bit. The great-grandparents were war refugees."

"Lots of those arrived here in the late 1930s and early 1940s, given what a mess Hitler and his Nazis made of Europe." Clarisse went and looked over his shoulder. "They were lucky. They got out in the late thirties before the Holocaust. To the Nazis, Jews weren't Austrians,

Czechs, Danish, Dutch, Germans, or Poles. They were just Jews, and they wanted to exterminate all of them. But this only proves that Perlmutter was indeed Jewish, which we'd already guessed. Probably a Danish-Jew."

"You don't seem to feel like a lot of Muslims might feel."

"For me, in fact for my entire family, the Jews are just another tribe of Abraham. My family is guiltier of thinking that of the three, the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions, Islam is the most advanced. While that makes some sense historically, it's irrelevant. I'm a complete agnostic who feels people can believe whatever they want to believe if they don't try to make others believe it too by violent means."

"That's a sane policy."

"It's the only possible policy. There's no other that's sane. Say, here's something more interesting." She pointed to a newspaper clipping titled *Leonardo Franchetti's Recital Brings down the House!* "It's about a Birmingham University recital of operatic arias. Notice anything about Mr. Franchetti?"

Ralph peered more closely at the old newspaper picture. "Could it be a much younger version of David Perlmutter?"

"If it is, he would have been around twenty-five when that article appeared. Maybe we couldn't find much about Perlmutter because he was using the name Franchetti?"

"It's a possibility. Would discovering that subterfuge piss someone off so much they would want to kill him?"

"Let's not jump to conclusions. Let's make some calls instead. The first one should be to the society-pages reporter who wrote this article. We'll make a list of other possibilities. But, to answer your question, it would depend on how much a nutter the killer is. A mad person doesn't think logically."

It took Ralph a while, but he finally found someone at Birmingham University who'd helped organize the recital. The older woman obviously didn't know Franchetti was Perlmutter, and Ralph didn't tell her. She'd been a student back then and remembered the event well enough.

"He was marvelous!" gushed the woman, perhaps channeling the young opera fan she'd been back then. "He sounded like some magnificent tenor from *La Scala*. And he was a handsome devil as well, not like some of those fat tenors. Does he now live in your area, Sergeant? Is he giving a recital there? I'd love to go! Is his voice still as powerful and masculine as before?"

"I'm afraid I must respect his privacy and decline to answer those questions, madam. I just wanted to confirm the date and time the event took place. Thank you for your help."

Ralph hung up and Clarisse burst out laughing. "I bet she'd still hop into bed with the bloke at the wink of an eye. Groupies are fanatics, even if they're opera groupies."

"She clearly didn't know his real name."

"Nor that he was Jewish, not an Italian Roman Catholic. Now our lives have become complicated."

"In what way, boss?"

"Back then, he was Leonardo Franchetti the opera singer who obviously made some money giving recitals, maybe even participating in some local productions. I have yet to hear how he sang—he might have been quite good despite that woman's obviously biased opinion—but he loved opera enough that he hid that he was Jewish so he could sing it. Somewhere, somehow, and sometime along the way, he reverted to David Perlmutter."

“Why would he hide he was Jewish? There are even Italian Jews who adopted Italian names to avoid persecution by Mussolini’s brownshirts. After the war, they didn’t deny they were Jewish.”

“I’m not sure, but maybe he thought that being Jewish meant that he’d have less opportunities to sing. But you’re missing the point. For whatever reason, he stopped singing.” She thought a moment. “Maybe being Jewish for an opera singer was like being a woman for policework. It would just create another hurdle to leap over.” She tapped her head. “And the important thing is whether he believed that. That makes reverting back to his birthname so unusual. Many performers use a stage name, after all. He just stopped singing. I have this gut feeling that finding out why will help us solve this murder case.”

“Maybe some anti-Semitic bastard found out he was Jewish and threatened him?”

“Yes, he could have done a runner, ended up here, and hid, but that bastard found him and made good on his threat.”

“We’re constructing a sandcastle, boss, an unstable theory that can be washed away with just one wave. If it’s a hate crime, it doesn’t have to have anything to do with his love of opera. No one around here even knew he could sing, but plenty of people might know he was Jewish.”

“You’re probably right. But I’d still have liked to hear him sing.”

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“So, now that I’ve convinced you to forget the man’s singing and focus on a potential hate crime, what’s our next step?”

“We go back in space and time in Birmingham and move from there to the present in the Bristol area. Somewhere someone hated him enough to kill him, whether for his Jewishness or something else. That hatred started some time ago and became deadly when the killer spotted Perlmutter. Here’s me off to see the DCI to get some additional bodies to work on this.”

“And I’ll keep perusing society pages, focusing on concerts and recitals Leo Franchetti gave. I’m thinking someone exposed him.”

“That’s maybe a fool’s errand. Franchetti could have performed more in Europe. You’ll go crazy. Make that only part of your search. The main question to answer: Who is David Perlmutter aka Leonardo Franchetti? Who played a role in his life, good or bad? How did he come to live in that tip of a flat? Who searched it?”

“And what did they think he had there? Who’s the caller, and how does he know Clarisse Workman?”

“Um, I’ll work on that end. You’re going to need help with all the rest, so let me go convince the DCI that’s the case.”

As she left her office for the DCI’s two doors towards the open-plan area of the CID, Clarisse knew there were some obvious suspects who knew her: They’d had cases of domestic terrorism in the area. A nearby Islamic center had been targeted, for example. They’d caught those responsible for that, but others in the same group had just gone into hiding. And those far-right terrorists probably hated Jews as much as Muslims. The former corresponded to earlier refugees, but the far-right nutters resented any outsiders who they thought had taken their jobs.

Killing just one Jew didn’t seem to be their style, though. They were more into mimicking the mass shooting events in America. “Jews will not replace us!” had been a chant created by the Nazis, but the emphasis had always been on the plural, Jews—or any group the far-right numpties considered impure.

She discarded the idea that Perlmutter was the victim of a far-right hate group. He was only one Jew. His murder had to be more personal.

She found the DCI in a good mood. He promised to get help from the other stations. In their police district, that often occurred. In big cases involving a lot of door-knocking and interviews early on, that was common praxis. The officers in secondment would come trickling in, not altogether happy with their lot—she never had been—and she and Ralph would have to sort them. Considering what they'd heard on the call, she wanted to chat up the coppers associated with the port area a bit more.

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The various efforts paid off. One old gossip had seen a slovenly thug—her words, not the copper's—skulking around Perlmutter's flat. A BOLF went out for him. Another officer from the port area found someone who knew where Perlmutter had done odd jobs. They soon had other sightings of the “slovenly thug” or Perlmutter. Even in a large urban area, some people were able to speak up if it didn't implicate them.

When they learned that the “slovenly thug” had a favorite pub not far from the docks, Clarisse suggested to Ralph that they surveil the tavern at night to see if he appeared.

She stared at the rain, almost forgetting she was in a pool EV with her sergeant and focusing on what the wags would be saying back at the station. The gossip would now even be more prolific because of the new coppers on loan. Neither her DCI nor her DI colleague would be participating in such gossip, but the other detective sergeants—not Ralph, of course—and constables and all the lower levels to PCs and other station staff, would have plenty of fodder for their gossip mill.

There were reasons why she identified with David Perlmutter: She'd always had three strikes against her because she was black, she was a woman, and she was Muslim. The irony was that she wasn't committed to her culture or her religion. Maybe some wags, especially the officers who had secondments and might be perceived to have the valid excuse of not knowing her that well, bought into the gossip that she was also lesbian, but her dates, which had included some serious and often continuing friendly relationships, had never been restricted to Muslim men nor women. And while she didn't eschew the Muslim label—she respected her family's background—she was very much like the lapsed Anglicans and Catholics—respectful but not fanatical.

That was why she had to understand anti-Semitic hatred. It was more than the Catholic-versus-Protestant rift that plagued Northern Ireland, which was more about political power than religious fervor. It was also more than some Muslims' hatred of Jews, or vice versa, that occurred in the Middle East.

She had once decided that it was about people looking for and finding scapegoats, someone they could blame for their failures in life. Now she wasn't even sure of that. It seemed to be something more primitive, a primordial us-versus-them attitude that had plagued human existence since prehistory, something so ingrained in the human psyche that it remained part of modern DNA.

*And our job is to try and control that?*

“I think that's him arriving,” Ralph said.

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“Our neighborhood gossip described him correctly. He does look like a ‘slovenly thug.’ Could he be armed?”

“Probably at most a knife, although he might believe his fists are good enough weapons.”

Clarisse nodded. He had huge, hairy hands. “Between the two of us, we should be able to sort him, don't you think?”

"I doubt he can run very fast. He'll either do battle or surrender."

"I doubt he'll do the latter. Let's do it then."

The "slovenly thug" under discussion was named Alan Heart, the surname a description of something the man didn't have as far as they knew. Nevertheless, Clarisse addressed him politely after stepping onto the walk in front of him.

"We'd like to have a little chat, Mr. Heart," she said.

He stopped and eyed her. "You're not my type, hon. I don't shag raghead black women, even if it's free."

*Docks must be a bad influence on him*, she thought. She took her warrant card out of her purse and shoved it into his face. "We just need a bit of information, you see. We can talk about it over tea or coffee."

"Go to hell," Heart said, trying to push her aside.

When she resisted, he took a swing. From behind, Ralph stopped the blow in midair, twisted the arm into the small of the back, and then put the cuffs on him.

"Let's go for a little ride, Mr. Heart," Clarisse said.

They borrowed an interrogation room in one of the nearby police stations. A local DS with secondment to Clarisse's team accompanied her while another DS and Ralph watched from behind the one-way window.

"That wanker's stench even seeps into here," Curt Crosby said to Ralph.

"Plenty of water around the port here for him to bathe too," Ralph said. "Go figure."

"You wouldn't want to bathe in that water, bro. Are you going to get that old gossip to identify him?"

"She already has. I sent her a pic via my mobile. We'll do the paperwork later if needs be."

"You think he did it?"

"TBD. Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he's not stupid enough to confess. Who knows? Maybe he saw something."

"All brawn, no brains. I bet you arrested him so easily because he was hypnotized by the Inspector's tits."

Ralph frowned. "If I were you, I'd rephrase that theory if you mention it. Maybe use, 'He was so enchanted by your beauty, boss, he didn't see the ugly old copper behind him.'"

Curt laughed. "You have a way with words."

"Aye, I'm just another Lord Byron."

As it turned out, Ralph got more from Crosby than Clarisse got from Heart. After coaching from his solicitor, Heart claimed he didn't know any David Perlmutter. They would have to find evidence to prove he did, a lot more than the word of an old neighborhood gossip who'd spotted him near Perlmutter's place.

He'd made only one comment that indicated racial bias, the one about 'raghead black women.' They let him go, even though they could have charged him for taking a swing at Clarisse.

After he'd been ushered out of the station, they sat around the same table to perform a post-mortem of the interrogation. Crosby had sorted coffee and tea.

"You can bet there are other dock workers who don't like Jews or Muslims," he said. "We even suspected some of them to be working with those SOBs who shot up the Islamic Centre a while ago."

"I suspect there are more synagogues than mosques," Clarisse said, "but Perlmutter didn't have to be practicing, so it's not clear how they'd know he was Jewish. But have any of those old suspects caused any new problems recently?"

"No. Recent cases involve two or three yobs all getting courage from their drink who decide to beat up some old Jewish man or insult some Jewish lady."

"Can we get a list of those? Not the victims but the dockworkers?"

"I don't see why not. Be forewarned: It could have been just a lot of posturing and angry words from drunken dockworkers. The old people can be overly sensitive."

"Some Germans might have had similar thoughts when the Nazis were coming to power. Six million or more deaths followed."

"There's that. We had Nazi sympathizers in Britain during WWII."

"And we still do."

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While Clarisse and Ralph waited for the list, they monitored their local situation. Perlmutter had lived and died on their patch, so someone with local knowledge had killed him. That explained why they and others were at computers in the CID open-plan area when the desk sergeant called Clarisse.

"I have a bloke here that needs to talk to you, Inspector."

"I'll send a DC down."

"He'll only talk with you."

"Bollocks! Who does he think he is? The PM?"

"No, he says his name is Leon Franchetti."

"I'll be right down!"

"What's up?" Ralph said. She told him. "Now that's interesting. Leon, Leo, Leonardo. If he sings opera, I'll be gobsmacked."

"You and me both."

Clarisse brought him up to an interrogation room after checking his ID that showed his name was indeed Carlo Leonardo Franchetti, although he went by Leon. She phoned Ralph to invite him to join her in the interview.

"You seemed surprised at my name," Leon said with a smile, "but I think I know why. You've already arrested my imposter, haven't you?"

"Do you know who your imposter is? His real name, that is?"

"I have no idea. I learned that someone was impersonating me a while ago. I'm over here on business—I work in Milan—but a few people in Birmingham thought I was the one doing the impersonating. That's when I decided to go to the police. A nice detective sergeant there told me that the name had come up in some investigation here. To make a long story short, I want to file a complaint against the man who's impersonating me."

"Do you work in opera, Mr. Franchetti?" Ralph said.

"I love opera, but I'm only in the chorus at *La Scala*. I was, to be precise. I've retired. I still sing but for free. Charity events and the like, mostly in northern Italy. That's why I never heard of the impersonation until now. From what I've heard, my impersonator sings better than I do, but that's beside the point."

"So, you have no idea who was impersonating you?"

"That sergeant said he couldn't tell me, and I'd have to query the SIO in the case here. I want that impersonator arrested, Inspector Workman."

*I'll have to thank that sergeant for maintaining confidentiality,* Clarisse thought. "Has he harmed you financially in some way?"

Leon frowned. "No, I suppose not. He gave the recitals using my name, but he still earned that money, I suppose. But isn't it against British law to impersonate someone?"

"That's an interesting legal question especially if, as you say, no harm was done. I might be able to tell him to cease and desist."

"That would be something at least to help my peace of mind. I wouldn't want my name tarnished."

"Um, I'm sure that he didn't tarnish it, Leon. He created something of a fan base for you, I dare say."

"Then you'll tell him to halt that practice? He could commit a crime and blame me for it, for example."

"I don't believe that will occur. You see, he's dead." Clarisse told Leon what they knew about David Perlmutter.

Their guest was horrified. "I feel like I'm reliving the mad era of Mussolini. I was but a little boy then."

"Are you Jewish, Leon?" Ralph said.

"No, but my family hated how the brownshirts treated the Jews. Of course, the Nazis were even worse. My grandfather fought and died in the resistance."

"A hero then," Clarisse said. "Ralph, do we know what was the full name Perlmutter used while impersonating Leon?"

Ralph checked the notes on his mobile. "Carlo Leonardo Franchetti. He must have known that Leon used the middle name more."

"Do you mean he chose me, planned the whole thing carefully, and studied everything about me? Good Lord! Is my family in danger?"

"I doubt it," Clarisse said. "Neither before nor now. He knew music well, picked out a good tenor in that chorus, and impersonated you because you were a relative unknown. You had something like an illustrious international career, Leon, thanks to David Perlmutter. You had no clue that was going on?"

"I heard nothing about it until this trip."

"And you became angry when you heard what Perlmutter did?" Ralph said.

"Enough to want to put a stop to it. Not enough to kill the man, if that's what you're insinuating!"

"I'm not insinuating anything, Leon. Please understand our dilemma. We're trying to find who murdered David Perlmutter."

"And, by the way, he'd stopped using your name some time ago," Clarisse said. "Someone scared him enough to make him stop."

"That wouldn't be me!"

"But it might be someone who knows the real Leon Franchetti."

Leon nodded. "That could be. If Perlmutter learned about me, someone else could as well, I suppose. What should we do?"

"We' is too many people. I'd like you to make a statement and then put this out of mind. David's death ends your problems."

"But not the mystery. Can I ask you to keep me informed? I'd like to know how it all turns out."

"We'll keep you in mind, Leon."



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“This case gets weirder with each passing day,” Ralph said to Clarisse after Leon departed. He saw her frown. “You’ve got that strange look, boss. What are you thinking?”

“Where’s his card?”

They’d exchanged cards with the Italian before he left. Ralph found it in his pocket and handed it to Clarisse. She dialed the number on it.

“Leon, it’s Inspector Workman. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Just a bit of packing. I’m catching a train for Southampton because I’ve decided to take a seafaring holiday and sail back to Italy.”

“I see. I have one more question for you if you don’t mind.”

“Anything to help a lovely lady who reminded me of another one who played Aida so well.”

Clarisse wasn’t sure who that was, but she imagined it had to be some operatic role.

“Thank you for that compliment, Leon. Here’s my question: On what day did you learn that David Perlmutter was impersonating you?”

“Let me see.” There was a bit of a pause. “I was in Birmingham, so guess it must have been Wednesday last.”

“Thank you. Have a safe trip.”

Clarisse started to scribble things on a notepad.

“What was that all about?” Ralph said.

“Who was the ‘nice lady’ who told us that Perlmutter was using the name Leonardo Franchetti?”

“That rabid fan in Birmingham.” Ralph nodded. “You’re thinking she heard about Leon’s visit there?”

“Or met Leon. Could she have been furious to learn that Perlmutter had fooled them when the real Leonardo made his appearance?”

“A bit of a stretch, don’t you think?”

“I’ll admit that, but I’d like to have the lads in Birmingham question her. No, damn it, we’ll go. We’ll keep the rest of the investigation going here and take a ride to the midlands.”

Ralph got the car while Clarisse informed the rest of the team and the DCI, and then they were off. Along the way, Clarisse called DI Roger Dunham, a Midlands PD detective she’d worked with a few times.

After she explained the situation, he said, “I doubt she’ll get violent, but I’ll have DC Ripsom give you two some company to pick her up. You can interrogate her at our station.

It was a straight shot from Bristol to Birmingham on the M5 that would take about two hours, the exact time depending on traffic. Dunham’s substation was near the university, so they picked up Ripsom on the way. Clarisse had to move to the rear seat because the gentle giant wouldn’t fit there.

“I haven’t visited the university in a while, boss,” Ripsom said, “so I can’t tell you where Miller Hall might be.”

“That’s what the GPS is for,” Ralph said as he indicated left, following the guidance system’s directions.

Clarisse repeated what she’d told Dunham to Clark Ripsom.

“Seems farfetched that some opera fan could get so worked up,” he said.

“‘Tis strange, Clark,” Clarisse said, “but I believe she had a crush on the fake Leonardo and landed back on Earth with a thud when the real bloke appeared. If she tends to be unstable otherwise, that could have put her over the edge.”

“In any case, old Roger’s taking no chances sending me as your bodyguard, I guess. I feel like the third wheel.”

“You didn’t see Perlmutter swinging from the rafters.”

“There’s that. It’s amazin’ what a good shot of adrenalin will do.”

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Miller Hall was home to both the musical and dramatical arts departments. In the entrance lobby, it was clear from the marquee that there was some commonality. Clarisse guessed that was appropriate. She didn’t know much about opera but knew enough to realize that it was as much drama as music. Each floor had professors’ offices clustered around reception bays. Lorraine Tilson oversaw one of the latter.

She took one look at the three coppers coming out of the lift and bolted for the stairs. Clark went after her, Clarisse nodded to Ralph to follow him, and then returned to the lift.

Ralph would later observe that Lorraine was more of a Wagnerian diva than a Puccini one. He had to explain that to Clarisse, and she had agreed. Clark hadn’t shown much finesse. She kicked him in his man parts and then butted him over as if she’d once played rugby. Ralph pinned her from behind. With three coppers against her, she decided to stop struggling. Ralph put the cuffs on, and Clarisse cautioned her.

At the substation, they put her in an interrogation room and accepted Dunham’s invitation to coffee or tea in his office. The four of them sorted their refreshments—as guest of the station, there were biscuits—and laughed about the case.

Clarisse couldn’t laugh much, though. They would soon learn why the fanatical Lorraine had decided to kill David Perlmutter.

“I’ve seen some weird cases,” Dunham said, once they’d become more serious. “This might be the weirdest.”

“I suppose it’s a twist on the scorned woman,” Clark said. “Her solicitor will probably advise her to only answer ‘no comment,’ you know.”

“And she’ll probably be able to claim lunacy,” Ralph said.

“A life term in a mental institution for the criminally insane isn’t much better than one in a prison for dangerous female offenders,” Clarisse observed.

“Out of our hands,” said Dunham. “And both will be in King Charlie’s, meaning that taxpayers will foot the bill. Hanging was so much more economical.”

Clarisse shuddered, thinking of what the penalty might be in an Islamic theocracy. “I’m still not satisfied, you know.”

“You have your killer,” Dunham said. “What’s bothering you?”

“Lorraine’s mental breakdown was a relatively recent event. David Perlmutter stopped singing quite a while ago.”

Ralph nodded. “There’s that. Maybe someone thought ending his singing with some threat was enough of a punishment?”

“At least this wasn’t a hate crime,” Dunham observed. “We’ve had enough of those. It was all about impersonating an opera singer.”

“I’m betting it was more than that. I might be paranoid—understandably I have a reason to be—but I bet he stopped singing opera basically because of anti-Semitism. That might not be the reason in Lorraine’s case, but the stench of anti-Semitism remains.”

Dunham nodded. "I see your point. But to more practical matters: Who do you want with you in the interrogation and who do you want to watch?"

"I'd like you to partner with me, Roger, to interrogate Lorraine if you don't mind. You were kind enough to help us out on your patch. Clark and Ralph can watch."

"That's fine. Let's go and get a confession from Lorraine Tilson. It shouldn't take much."

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Clarisse entered her flat about nine-thirty that evening, ready for a glass of wine and a nice soak. It had been a strange case, but she still needed to celebrate the end of it her way after her team had taken the piss at a pub, the traditional celebration, which was still going on. She then remembered the CD that Ralph had handed to her. She took it out of her purse and slipped it into the player.

She was just about to start the water when Perlmutter's golden voice filled the flat. She padded out naked to see what aria that first one might be. "Nessun Dorma" was the title. She supposed that was Italian, but the language wasn't important. The music was wonderful and so was the man's voice.

They still didn't know what had made David Perlmutter stop singing opera. *Perhaps another nutter like Lorraine Tilson had scared him?* That much would remain a mystery, and she would have to mention it in her report. It wasn't exactly a cold case, but it hadn't been completely solved either.

She offered the dead man a toast and wished for a world where no one would have to hide their ethnicity from bigots and haters. If that wish could come true, she could live with the incomplete result.

## Stalker

[Note from Steve: Readers met DS Betsy O'Toole and FBI agent Carl Hughes in several novels of the "Inspector Steve Morgan" trilogy. This story is about a case that occurs sometime after those three novels when Carl has a new career in England as a private investigator. Enjoy.]

That morning as she leaned back at her desk in the CID of her Bristol PD substation, Betsy was wondering how Carl was doing. She'd been a bit over-zealous the night before, and he'd admitted that he was a bit sore at breakfast. He'd said it with a lecherous smile, though, as they both sat naked on their towels to enjoy their toast and coffee, so she knew he forgave her. *Or maybe celebrated it?* Frankly, she was a bit worse for wear herself. *Who said sex wasn't good exercise?*

Thinking of the previous night's activities seemed a more pleasant task than trawling through case records on HOLMES. Her thoughts would wander away from the boring entries in that police database to that wonderful night, only one of many recent ones now that they were more a couple. The PI had just returned from Edinburgh after solving a case up there, and she'd wanted to welcome him home properly.

Her office extension's ring interrupted those pleasant thoughts.

"I have a Professor Thwaite from Bristol University on the line," said the duty sergeant. His loud voice came up the stairs directly to the CID as well as through the old phone's receiver. *I'm not deaf, you twit!* "She insists on speaking to you."

Betsy remembered the woman. Her specializations were in archaeology and history of the British Isles. That covered eras from the ancient Romans to the Middle Ages with a lot of focus on Celts—today's Irish, Scots, and Welsh. She'd visited the woman for a case that had seemed to involve modern-day worshippers of the Seven Sisters aka the Pleiades. *She must know by know how that case had turned out.*

"I'll take the call. Put her through."

"Detective Sergeant O'Toole?" Betsy said yes. "This is Professor Valerie Thwaite. Do you remember me?" Another yes followed by an "of course" and a "how are you?" added. "I desperately need your help. One of my students is stalking me!"

"Please explain, Professor. I'm guessing this is about a lot more than an infatuation?"

"Threats on the phone like 'If I can't have you, I'll make sure no one else can.' Fantasy-like but explicit descriptions about shagging me in many ways, most not pleasant. And the local plods downtown here just tell me to get a restraining order against the student. But I can't do that without evidence!"

Betsy's skin crawled. She'd had a good friend who'd gone to Oxford and had a similar experience there. That friend had finally got evidence on her stalker, and the stalking student had committed suicide by blowing up his bedsit before the police could stop him. Two coppers had been injured. Her friend had recovered from all that trauma, ended up making a lot more money than Betsy as an actuary, and now had a wonderful family, a husband and two children. Betsy knew that her friend was one of the lucky ones, though. People who were stalked often ended up murdered.

"Officially, Professor Thwaite, I must tell you the same thing my colleagues in the local police did. Unofficially, I can recommend a private investigator who can look into your case. For example, we can put him to work to collect enough evidence to put the pervert in jail."

"Um, I don't know. Right now, I'm a bit reluctant to trust any male, if I'm honest."

"I can understand that, but you can trust Carl Hughes, Professor. He's an ex-FBI agent from the States who now lives here. I'd trust him with my life." *In a way, I have!* "He can meet you in a public spot that's neutral ground, and you can decide if he's a good fit." She smiled. *I know that's true, but in a different way!*

"Carl Hughes? Okay. Tell him to call me."

"I'll do so right after we finish talking, Professor."

"It's Valerie."

"And Betsy. Carl will help you."

"Thanks, Betsy. I'll wait for his call."

After Betsy rang off, she thought, *well, he's always saying I should drum up some business for him. Let's see how he can handle Valerie Thwaite!*

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Without contradicting information from Betsy, Carl Hughes was expecting a paranoid old woman when he entered the pub not far from the university's main campus. Instead, the woman who timidly beckoned to him from the more private cubby seemed to be about Betsy's age, not some wrinkled docent who'd created some weird fantasies straight out of that *Fifty Shades* drivel he deplored. *Maybe this is a legit case after all?*

The professor had scrunched into the inside corner of the cubby by the time he took a seat opposite her. "I'm only going to show you my PI license, ma'am; I'm not going to pull a knife on you." He shot her his best disarming smile as he handed her his creds.

She studied them and then handed them back. "Betsy said that you're ex-FBI. That's a UK document. While it appears to be authentic, it says nothing about your FBI service."

Carl sighed. "The only thing I have to prove that beyond what's in here—" He tapped his brow. "—is my letter of resignation to the FBI office in New York City and their response accepting it. I can send that to you as an attachment to a text message or email."

"Yes, please do that. No hurry, but it would make me feel better."

He gestured around the pub that was only about half full. It was too early for the dedicated drinkers. "This is a public space. Nothing will happen to you here, Professor. And, by the way, to protect yourself more in the future, you shouldn't choose a cubby. If I meant you harm, you'd be trapped. A table in the open area would have been a better choice."

She seemed startled but then smiled. *Did she just realize that I couldn't possibly mean her harm if I just said that?*

"Um, right you are. He could see me at a table, though. This pub is near the university."

"Okay. So, you walked here in the dark from your office?"

Again the deer-in-the-headlights expression, but she shook her head in the negative. "The street's well lit. I used to come here often. Sometimes even with students."

"And now out of fear you go between your flat and the university and that's all?"

"I even sleep sometimes in my office chair. My office has a side bathroom. I mostly do that after one of his calls."

"Have you recorded any of them?"

"I receive lots of calls. His number's always different, so I don't recognize it and must answer."

*Burners. The perv's tech-savvy, at least a bit.* "I can fix you up with a gizmo that records only when it's him and you hit a record button. That's one problem of gathering evidence that's solved."

"Do you really want to listen to those awful things he says to me?"

“Ma’am, I’ve heard and seen a lot of awful things. Beyond collecting evidence against him, I need to hear what he says and how he says it.” *So I can tell if he’s going to hurt you!*

“Can’t you just pommel him so he stops badgering me?”

Carl laughed but then thought, *Is that what she thinks a typical black man would do?* He decided to ignore that thought. Many Brits were closet racists, but Thwaite was an educated woman that Betsy respected, and that wouldn’t occur if Betsy suspected the woman was a racist.

“I could do that if I wanted to join other residents in one of King Charlie’s boarding houses. No, Professor, we need to protect you as our priority and then gather evidence against him. I can employ techniques that the plods can’t use or won’t, though. My experience in these cases is that their suggested restraining order is mostly useless. We want to get the goods on the perp.”

She smiled. “I see I can improve my knowledge of American English by talking with you. How long have you known Betsy?”

“We worked together on a case some time ago. We’ve been good friends ever since.” *For now, I’m not saying how close we are!* “I can’t involve her. First, her substation covers a different area, even though you chose to consult her. Second, let’s just say I might use some methods her boss would think might reflect badly on his team.” *Although Steve Morgan’s probably not above bending the rules a bit.*

“So, PIs work outside the law just like in crime fiction?”

“Let’s say we’re usually just focused on one case at a time, and they’re often simpler than the ones cops here in the UK must deal with. Plus, there are those methods I mentioned. I also can thumb my nose at the Home Office’s bureaucracy, and they aren’t looking over my shoulder watching what I do as if I were a normal plod.”

“I see. I suppose we’ve now gone off track. Can you arrest my stalker?”

“No, but I can present evidence to the police so that they can do you that favor. I have already done so in several cases. My motivation is like those of Betsy and her colleagues: I want to protect innocent people and put the bad guys in jail. The latter sometimes doesn’t occur, but I work hard on the first.”

“Okay. I’ll hire you if you promise to protect me from this pervert.”

“Yes, let’s talk more about just how I plan to do that.”

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Carl didn’t like stakeouts. He’d done plenty in the FBI, and he’d had to do more of them in his new profession as a PI. The latter were a bit more boring when some wife only wanted to know if her husband was philandering (most cases), or vice versa (the minority), but one could entertain oneself with a bit of quiet music and general observations about how ordinary people went about their ordinary lives. He had to be attentive, though; otherwise, he’d miss something important, and now that might cost him money in the long run.

He’d given Professor Thwaite a bargain, asking for a retainer without any prepayment, which was usually uncommon for his type of work. He was sure she had the money, but she seemed to be almost a friend of Betsy. And the poor woman was scared to death. He’d already perused some of the text messages and emails. Her stalker was a crazy, sick bastard and very threatening, at least verbally. Nothing was signed, of course, but the language was similar in all the messages, oral or written. *Push comes to shove, I’ll put on a balaclava and just beat the shit out of him! He deserves it!*

Carl’s problem was that Eliot Evans just looked like any other normal university student: Blond hair, cold blue eyes, not very tall, a nerdy smile plastered on his face most of the time. He

didn't look like a stalker, but he sorta walked slithering along in a creepy fashion that would probably make most women tell him to get lost. In other words, he could be on a poster advertising Hitler's youth corps. He'd picked Thwaite to be his Brunhilda, and, at first glance, they would have been the perfect couple to breed perfect little Nazi children for the master race. *What will he think of a black PI shadowing him?*

Of course, Carl also spent some time getting background material on the little Nazi. His stepfather and mother had sent him off to a private boarding school when he was ten. He'd done well and entered Bristol University, his second choice. Oxford had been the first, but even with his stepfather's leverage there—that man was a graduate—they hadn't accepted Eliot. He wouldn't be pestering Professor Thwaite otherwise.

Carl took some time away from his stakeouts to interview a few teachers and students at the prep school, his excuse being the writing of a story about Eliot's busy mother, a chemistry professor in Reading. Carl's cover story was never questioned; he was good at undercover work. It was also amusing to use their racist reactions against them and make them reveal more than they would with white guy. The FBI training had covered that and most other necessary skills one might need as a PI.

One young woman unloaded on him, though.

"I don't know how his mother could spawn such a worthless piece of human shite!" Sharon Sandler said when he explained what he was doing. "You'd better not mention him in your article...or whatever it is that you're writing. I don't know her, but it would certainly put her in a negative light just to be associated with that creep."

"Did he do something nasty to you?" Carl said.

"No, but he wanted to do. On our fourth date, I allowed him to come up for coffee. He wanted to get it on and propositioned me."

"You mean, pay you?"

"Yes. He said I could be his mistress and he could make me a rich woman if I only let him do some kinky stuff. I'll have to admit that I liked the bastard a lot until that point—otherwise I wouldn't have invited him in—but there was no way I was going to do what he asked. The Marquis de Sade is apparently his hero!"

Carl nodded. "How did you get rid of him?"

"You're not going to put this in your story, are you?"

"No, I'm just trying to get information about the family. You know, how geniuses can occur in normal families and so on."

"Um, maybe the mother's a genius, but he's not. He's just a creep. I got rid of him by telling him I was calling the plods. I saw him ball up his fists. I thought he was going to strike me. What he was proposing sounded like a lot of things, but one was prostitution. And he wanted to watch me shag some other blokes."

Carl frowned. "That does sound a bit kinky. Did he have anyone in mind?"

She laughed. "He mentioned his stepfather and the Lord Mayor. Maybe he wanted to blackmail them?"

"Is his stepfather rich?"

"He's involved in the government in some way, I think. In any case, I wanted nothing to do with what he was proposing."

"Did he threaten you?"

"He left but said that if I told anyone about what he'd proposed, he'd kill me."

"People say things like that even when they don't mean them."

“Oh, I think he meant it, so I’ll deny I told you about it. I just wanted to warn you to exclude him from your article. You shouldn’t waste any ink on him.”

“Um, I won’t.” Carl thanked the young woman and went on gathering information about Eliot Evans, but he wouldn’t forget what he’d been told. If only fifty percent of it was true, it correlated well with the messages to Thwaite, and Eliot was one creepy kid. At the very least, he was mentally disturbed, but he was also a dangerous predator who could easily turn into a serial killer.

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Carl had discarded the direct approach of strong-arming Eliot, threatening him to cease and desist his stalking of the professor or else, but Carl was more responsible than that. That would just put some other woman in danger. Carl had to catch him doing something serious enough to put him in an asylum for the criminally insane, so the ex-agent stalked the stalker. Carl figured he had enough background, but none of it was all that incriminating. Perhaps the police could trace his calls to Thwaite and get some circumstantial evidence, but Carl couldn’t do that. *Or can I?*

The English considered the M4 from Bristol to London to be a good road. Carl supposed that, relatively speaking, that straight shot into what Betsy called the Big Smoke wasn’t all that bad, but he hated it. The motorway was always busy, and he was still uncomfortable about driving on the wrong side of the road. The last time he had done that, it was a favor for Betsy: She wanted to see King Charlie open a new library. That had made the news because its location was part of one of his estates that he sometimes donated out of the goodness of his heart. Carl assumed his Royal Highness was richer than God, so the donation must have been an insignificant one for him, but the media loved it. So had Betsy; Carl just bit his tongue and made no anti-royal comments.

Ambreesh Singh arrived late at that coffee bar, so Carl ordered a second coffee and a latte for the Sikh tech. He couldn’t remember exactly how they’d met, but Carl had left the FBI after a secondment to MI5, something he had in common with DI Morgan, his old Army friend now at Bristol PD.

“How’s our mutual friend Betsy O’Toole?” Ambreesh said after shaking hands. “I lost a bet, by the way.”

“What bet?”

“I bet Steve Morgan that you two wouldn’t last more than six months together.”

Carl nodded. “Cultural differences, racial differences, my leaving the FBI, etcetera, etcetera. Not as many differences as between you and Professor Thwaite, you know.”

Ambreesh turned red. “She told you?”

“Of course. I’m not that good a detective. I’m after her stalker, so I wanted to know her entire background. Don’t worry. I won’t ever mention her to your wife, you old romantic. She hasn’t either, has she?”

“No. We have an understanding. And I trust her enough that I even tried to get her to join our group.”

“Your sextet that meets for dinner sometimes?”

“The same. She has no significant other, so she demurred. Can’t blame her. Did Steve talk to you about the group.”

“Only to say it’s hard for Kanzi and him to participate with four of you here in London. It’s quite a ride. Betsy used to be pissed with her because she hadn’t been invited, but that’s all past history now that we’re together.”



“We should invite you two.”

“Don’t even think about it. I travel too much as it is in my PI work. It’s like trying to cover the entire US seaboard.”

Ambreesh smiled. “People think the UK is just an island, even people living here, but it’s a big island. But I have to get back to MI5 soon. You said you need some help.”

“Esther Brookstone said you’d be better than anyone in the Yard.”

“She’s biased. And I might not be able to do anything for you. All the national agencies have rules about how we handle requests made by local authorities. And you’re now just a PI.”

“And ex-FBI agent who did some work for MI5, if you recall.”

“I do. So, what do you want from me.”

“Your old girlfriend has a stalker, and I want to put him into an insane asylum. I’d like to look at his phone records.”

“That’s easy enough to do, but you can’t use it for the CPS, you know.”

“But I can use it to try to catch him in the act of doing something or planning something, like killing Professor Thwaite.”

Ambreesh’s darker Caucasian skin turned pale. “Is she in danger?”

“He’s a complete nutter. I don’t know how much longer he’ll go on before going off the deep end and doing her harm. That’s something I need to prevent.”

“Um, I see. Do you have his phone numbers?”

“Yes and no. They’re burners, what you blokes call pay-as-you-go. He changes them a lot. The voice stays the same, though, when he describes what he’ll do to her if she doesn’t do as he asks.”

“If she has copies of those messages, can’t she get a restraining order?”

“She—meaning me—needs proof that it’s him. His name’s Eliot Evans, by the way.”

“Address?” Carl told him. “That’s enough to get me started. Keep my name out of this, though.”

“I just want the information to keep one step ahead of the bastard. If he says he plans to do something to her, I want to be there and catch him in the act.”

“The CPS might call that entrapment.”

“Then I’ll have to threaten to cut off his goolies.”

Ambreesh smiled. “You’re learning the local slang.”

Carl smiled back. “Bets is a good teacher.”

“Okay. Give me your contact info. When I have something, I’ll ring you. Are you heading back to Bristol?”

“You bet. This city is crazy. Must result from being near all the politicians. Or maybe that crazy king and his family? You don’t happen to know a nearby florist, do you? I’d like to surprise Bets.”

“I can give you that information too.”

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After having dinner with Betsy, complete with his bouquet as centerpiece, Ambreesh delivered via a text message. “He says, ‘I’m acting tonight, no matter what. Be ready!’ I think you’d better be at Valerie’s house just in case.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, bro. I’ll be there. Text me anything else you get.” Carl turned to Betsy. “I think the professor is in danger. I’d better get over to her place.”

“Understood. Be careful.”

He parked around the corner and walked to Valerie's building, took the lift, and knocked on her door. He heard steps and then heavy breathing. "It's me, Carl Hughes, professor. Are you okay?"

She opened the door. "Just nervous. I got a text message from Eliot. I was going to call you."

"I got it too." She looked puzzled. "I'll explain later. Do you have the deadbolt on the back door?"

There was a door off Valerie's kitchen that could be used to bring groceries in from the car park. That and the front door were the only entrances to the flat if one discounted the rear windows.

"I always keep it locked now. Same with the front. I was leery about even opening it for you. He disguises his voice too well."

"While he might have seen me, he doesn't know who I am. Let's lock things back up. If he tries to get in, he'll receive a surprise."

"Do you have a gun?"

"No, but I can beat the crap out of him if needs be. Pour me a drink while I check all the windows and doors."

They were talking about Celtic rituals—Betsy's Celtic roots were deep, so Carl wanted to impress her—when someone banged on the door. Valerie turned pale; Carl put a finger to his lips and crooked a finger for her to follow him. "Ask who it is?"

"It's Betsy O'Toole," came a voice that Carl knew well.

He threw open the door. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Maybe to make an arrest."

"Explain, please."

"We just received a BOLF. Eliot's mother and stepfather are dead. Murdered! He's on their security cams."

Carl nodded. "I should have known. He's going to make a clean sweep. Now I wish I had a gun!"

Betsy entered. "Hello, professor."

Valerie had collapsed on her sofa, looking stunned. "I-I don't understand. He must be a complete nutter."

"If that means crazy," Carl said, "it's an appropriate description. But it works in our favor."

"How's that?" the two women asked in chorus.

"He's lost touch with reality. He'll make mistakes. Betsy, have you told anyone at your workplace about this?"

"No. I suppose I should."

"Indeed. Make the call and say you need some backup. Valerie, what do you have here that I can use as a weapon?"

"Um, kitchen knives, insect spray, mace...I'm not sure."

"Let's arm Betsy and me with knives. You grab the mace."

"And if he's armed with a gun?" Betsy said.

"Then we can only hope your backup gets here soon."

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The wait seemed like an eternity, although it was only about two hours. The mother and stepfather's place was in Swindon, the next town over when going on the M4 from Bristol to

London. Something crashed through a back window. Carlos ran to see Eliot's small frame squeeze through the window. He ignored the cuts from the glass.

"So, you're the bastard who my Valerie is seeing!" He had a knife, a big one, and lunged at Carl. "Black bastard, prepare to die!"

Carl tossed a chair at Eliot and retreated into the dining room, a buffer zone between his assailant and the two women. "Come and get me, you white prat! We Americans learned years ago how to handle the British!"

As Eliot came through the door, another chair crashed into him so hard he staggered. His knife hand got caught up in the pieces, so Carl moved in.

The smaller man was more agile and a lot stronger than Carl had thought. He mostly dodged a right hook, although Carl drew blood, and spun around to free his knife hand. And then something occurred that Carl would have wanted to avoid. Valerie entered the dining room, screaming.

"You-you spawn of the devil. Take this!"

She started to empty the mace into Eliot's face. He just wiped it away, grabbed her, and put the knife to Valerie's throat.

"I don't know who you are, you black bastard, but back off or she dies!"

Carl held up his hands, palms towards Eliot, and backed away a few steps. That's when Valerie's leg came back, her foot landing in Eliot's crotch. He screamed in pain and dropped the knife; Carl went in to finish him.

"You could have helped, Hon," Carl told Betsy. "Put the cuffs on him."

"I was opening the door for the backup, Luv." She smiled. "You two handled him well enough." She walked over and put cuffs on him after giving him a kick to stop him squirming and groaning. "We'll take it from here, Valerie."

The professor and PI looked at each other, smiled and nodded.

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After the two backup cops had removed Eliot—who would be charged with two murders and stalking with intent to kill—Betsy, Valerie, and Carl sat down to decompress.

"Only the paperwork is left," Betsy said.

"Tell me something, Sergeant O'Toole. How long have you been in a relationship with my PI?"

"Inspector Morgan set Carl and me up with a blind date quite a while ago. I first thought that such a relationship would never work. He worked for the FBI in New York, and I worked here for Bristol PD. I guess he always wanted to be like Sam Spade, so he resigned from the FBI and became an English PI. My gain but maybe his loss?"

Carl shrugged. "My gain too." He winked at Valerie. "Our little secret, if you'll keep it, professor."

"I obviously benefitted too. What will happen to Eliot Evans?"

"I suspect he will be in an asylum for the criminally insane the rest of his life. I wouldn't worry about him, Valerie."

"I'm not. He deserves that. But it's such a shame. He was a bright young man. I assume his mother was also bright too."

Carl tapped his head. "Eliot was damaged up here. It's up to the shrinks to figure out why. After his killing spree, he might have become suicidal. That often occurs. In his twisted mind, he blamed three people for all his problems. A stabler individual wouldn't have done that."

Valerie smiled at Betsy now. "So, tell me, Detective Sergeant O'Toole, when will the wedding occur?"

Betsy blushed. "We haven't discussed that yet, professor. Carl?"

"You'll be on our list of invitees if it occurs," he said. "I need a chance to get fully adapted to your beautiful country. And I need a vacation. Any suggestions, professor?"

"People say the Lake District is beautiful this time of year."

"That's expensive, Carl!" Betsy said.

"I'm sure the professor can recommend a little inn somewhere that's very reasonable."

"I'd love to do that."

## Last Chance

[Note from Steve: DI Harold Gregg appeared in both an “Esther Brookstone” novel and a “Steve Morgan” novel. He’s a gruff old copper who earned the respect of both those detectives. Enjoy.]

Harold Gregg sat at his office laptop mumbling to himself. Most words were curses directed at HOLMES, the UK-wide police database. Although it had a long history, he suspected recent updates had it in for old anti-tech coppers like him.

He’d heard someone say once that computer databases were only as good as the people who input their data. He believed that a lot of those people knew nothing about policing, so he thought HOLMES was limited in helping him solve cases. Their superiors’ solution to that empirical observation was to make every copper input data about their own cases, which exacerbated the problem, of course; but he hoped his usual attitude towards anything having to do with computers, a badge of courage in his opinion, was what degraded the quality of his inputs, not his stupidity. Same for the data he tried to access.

He’d been searching for a tattoo that had appeared on a murder victim’s body. He thought it might be gang related. They had an ID for the victim, but the lorry driver George Duncan didn’t seem to be a known gang member or even look like he might be one. Gregg thought he might be a reformed ex-member of some gang, though, and with the movement of people in that profession around the UK, something that might justify the creation of HOLMES, it didn’t have to be local. *But it isn’t a stretch to think the body’s artwork was a clue to some UK gang, is it? Something from the victim’s younger years?*

He sensed the shadow of someone entering his main office at the Morpeth substation, part of the Newcastle-on-Tyne police district. He had another desk in the city he could use if needs be, but he preferred his little office outside the city. He lived in between the two urban areas that someday might become one in a small house on a sprawling estate of similar homes, a typical example of suburban sprawl, but comfy nonetheless, so he could go either way a case might take him.

The person in his doorway wouldn’t be his ex-DS who’d taken a position with the NCA. Gregg had suffered through a secondment with MI5 not that long ago. He’d ended that by concluding that working for one of the national policing agencies was more trouble than it was worth, so he didn’t envy Tim having that new job...no, not at all!

As if to generate a counterexample to prove Harold wrong, the MI5 agent who’d “recruited” him for that secondment was an ex-Northumberland copper as was his ex-sergeant, so maybe MI5 and NCA had become more of a young and ambitious man’s game. *Maybe I’m too old or set in my ways?* He knew that some would think both descriptions fit him.

Retirement was only five years away if he wanted it that soon. Fishing in the North Sea in the summer, lakes and rivers in the winter, sometimes through the ice—there were days when that sounded like heaven! It would keep him out of his wife’s hair at least. Their holidays were often tense times; he could tolerate her but not her family, so fishing seemed to be a good alternative to that, especially because neither she nor anyone in her family liked to fish.

*But maybe I’d be bored?* And he certainly didn’t want his retirement funds slowly pared down by some toffs always wanting to make a name for themselves with budget-cutting measures! Politicians, Labourites or Tories, so often took the path of least resistance, and cutting government medical and retiree benefits always seemed to be on that path.

He waved a hand without looking up. “Be with you in a minute, Kitty.”

He'd guessed his visitor was his DCI, who also traveled back and forth between Morpeth and Newcastle. He'd recognized the footsteps. Katherine Ellison wore pumps that always sounded a warning click on the station's old tile floors. He uttered one last curse and turned towards his boss. He was surprised to see standing beside Kitty a statuesque black woman, complete with dreadlocks, high cheekbones, and dark, sparkling eyes, all part of a pleasant face. The intelligent eyes studied him as he studied her.

"Your new detective sergeant has arrived, Inspector Gregg. Dawn McAdams, meet Harold Gregg. I'll leave you two now to get acquainted. I have an appointment in the city with our dear and highly respected Superintendent of Detectives and Lord Mayor. You can imagine my enthusiasm."

The new hire wouldn't know that "dear and highly respected" was Kitty's code for a political fat prat no legitimate copper in the district could ever respect. He considered Kitty in the latter group and worked well with her, although she'd been around enough to know all the political arses in their complicated northeastern patch.

He gestured towards one of the chairs in front of his desk as the DCI took her leave. *Dawn McAdams?* He scratched his balding pate, realizing that he'd never seen a picture of her. *Or did I ignore it?* What a recruit looked like or their sex was of little concern to him. Whether the recruit could do the job was.

He remembered that this ex-copper from Manchester hadn't had an easy time in the football capital of England. She'd been the only female officer on a team of hardened male officers struggling to control the illegal Mancunian drugs business. He supposed that meant she'd only been given shite assignments. Continuing to read between the lines, though, Gregg had seen that she had promise, but an attack in a dark warehouse, a centralized illegal drugs dispensary, had almost ended her life. He thought that maybe that had convinced her to seek a transfer, not the misogynist pricks with whom she'd worked.

When his previous sergeant had transferred to NCA, Gregg thought he might try a female one for a time. Dawn McAdams had seemed to be a logical choice, but she wasn't of Gaelic descent. *Maybe some slaveowners from the colonial period were in her family's past?* She looked young, increasing his worry about whether she could do the job. He'd like to retire, though, without having to show the ropes to another sergeant!

He stood and offered a hand. "Welcome aboard, Sergeant McAdams. You'll find it's usually a bit quiet here at Morpeth station unless we get involved in something in Newcastle, always a possibility, but as luck would have it, I'm just beginning a new murder case that might be local, and I could use some help. We'll be a team of two unless I feel the need to ask DCI Ellison for some DCs and PCs to temporarily help us out." He sat down, and she followed his lead. "But before we get into details about the case, do you have any general questions you'd like to ask? Might as well get them out of the way if you do."

"First, thank you, Inspector, for hiring me sight-unseen. That speaks to your extensive policing experience." He resisted a smile at the obvious buttering-up. "Second, I'd like to mention some things I didn't put in my bio." *Oh hell, some eejit stole your teddy bear as a lass and you still want to get even?* "I wanted to be a detective ever since I was a kid, but it hasn't turned out to be all that I'd imagined." *A knife in the gut has a way of changing one's mind about that!* "I'm willing to work my butt off and give it a last chance. You know that I'm damaged goods, but I promise to give you all I've got. And, before you ask, my first name was changed to Dawn from what was more popular in my grandparents' homeland. My surname McAdams was my ex-husband's."

“You’re divorced?”

“Widowed. He was a casualty of the Mancunian gang wars too. I lived; he died. End of story.”

He swallowed. *More baggage!* He then tapped his brow. “From personal experience, the recovery of your mental health from a knife wound takes longer than the recovery of your physical health. Getting you back to work might be the best therapy for the former. To that end, let me summarize what we know about the case.”

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Harold’s summary was brief. The murder had probably occurred just the previous night, although they didn’t have the complete pathological or forensic data yet. “I saw this tattoo at the crime scene on the bloke’s body, though.” He showed her the pic he’d snapped with his mobile. “Quite elaborate, this lion with a lightning bolt in his mouth. Ever see it in your old Mancunian hunts?”

“May I commandeer your laptop for a moment, Inspector Gregg?”

He nodded. “Let’s make it Harold or just Gregg. You’re Dawn or just McCall. Here at the station, of course. Be my guest with the laptop. I hate the damn thing!”

“Unless my access has been terminated, I can trawl an NCA database that might confirm my suspicion. I’ve seen this artwork without the lightning bolt.” She typed furiously for a few moments, not using Gregg’s two-index-finger method but a real touch typist’s. “Recognize the lion?” He nodded. “They put things in the lion’s mouth for different branches of the gang around the UK. It’s called Lions’ Pride, by the way. I’ve seen a spear, sword, and hammer in the lion’s mouth. Their main HQ is in Manchester. They’ve been branching out, though. Looks like they might be moving into the Northeast as well.”

“But if this prat was a member of this new branch, who killed him?”

“Maybe a local gang who doesn’t want the Lions’ Pride here?”

“Is this going to be a troubling case for you, Dawn?”

“A bit of revenge for me would be a better description, but that doesn’t disqualify me. And I won’t be troubled, In—Harold.”

“Okay, you and I will then make a visit to the morgue. We know COD, that ubiquitous gangland knife. I want a better estimate of TOD. Before we do that, let’s probe your theory a bit more.” He waved a computer printout. “Our lads in Newcastle furnished me a list of local gangs and any graphics art they might be using. I was hoping to ID Mr. Duncan’s artwork, but maybe you can ID a rival gang as I read the names to you?”

“As you might imagine, I’m a bit rusty. During the three months I was recuperating, with the funeral and all that making it even more difficult, a lot could have happened in Mancunian gangland. We were looking at some expansion efforts before and what those might be up against, but frankly I don’t remember any gangs from this area being mentioned. I guess I’m cursed to be involved with police efforts to curb gang activities.”

“For the moment, for your first case. Sorry. You’re good at using computers. Maybe later you can look at some of the names of our local thugs and see if any of them ring a bell. I’ve got that list too. The problem with your theory is that it requires us to find connections. It’s also possible that our lorry driver left gang life and his girlfriend killed him for being a git. Coppers don’t make good candidates for a lasting and loving romance; gang members and ex-gang members are probably even worse.”

She laughed. “Seems like that could be a subject for some sociology thesis.”

"Might be better than some of the shite the academics publish, I dare say. For just this once, I'm driving. Finding Doc's hangout is a bit problematic, to get to the hospital and once we're inside the building. Got a purse?"

"Just a kit I left on an empty desk the DCI said I could claim. I carry scene-of-crime garb in it." She tapped her blouse. "The girls guard my warrant card."

*Too much information, Dawn,* Harold thought. But he was liking the directness of his new sergeant. *Maybe she's a female Harold Gregg?*

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Doc McGrath was an old fellow who coppers called Doctor Death, but not to his bearded face. He was a barrel of a man whose piercing blue eyes, bulbous and veined nose, and overall musculature belied his gentle nature. Like all Scots, he could be caustic and witty. He looked Dawn up and down and said, "A definite improvement over your last sergeant, Harold. Looks like I move faster than you do, even if we are the same age. We've finished with Mr. Duncan. COD as expected, although he had an uncomfortable future ahead of him."

"How's that?" Harold said, ignoring the barb and the menacing scowl. McGrath seemed like an old Scottish warrior who was threatening an old Norman serf into doing his master's bidding, namely Gregg, but, while not exactly friends, they got along well enough. "You're not suggesting suicide, are you?"

"Who knows if that would eventually have been in the plan. He had lung cancer."

"A smoker then?"

"Reformed one. But probably still around a lot of them if lorry driving was his life's occupation."

"What about TOD?" Gregg said, winking at Dawn. He was already tired of the autopsy results only Doctor Death could find interesting.

"My best determination, all things considered, is between eleven last evening and three this morning. And SOCOs say he wasn't killed where he was found. Not surprising, and I agree with them. Some post-mortem bruising indicates he was dumped on that edge of the road. Maybe even from his vehicle? I heard it hasn't been found yet?"

"It's not too hard to find a box lorry that size, but yes, we're still looking for it. The owner of the shipping company is driving some of the PCs nuts. They and some DCs are doing all they can. It could be just a robbery gone bad, although that lorry left the depot only filled with auto parts."

"Could be someone wanted that lorry, and Duncan put up a fight," Dawn said.

"Um, all that's your problem, Harold, not mine."

"If someone wanted a lorry, what would they use it for?" Harold mused, his mind wandering a bit towards the case's future. He came out of his funk. "Okay. Thanks, Henry. Give my regards to the missus."

"Ha! Yours and mine are out today spending our money, Harold. They went into Newcastle to shop."

"Evelyn didn't mention that. But why worry. We never have enough time of our own to spend our money! And that will hurt your retirement more than mine, I'm sure."

McGrath's laugh echoed down the hall that led to the morgue from his little office in front. He then got serious. "You haven't had a murder case in a while. Be careful."

"I always am."



“If you’d never met Doc,” Dawn said as she slid into the passenger seat of their pool EV, “you’d be scared to death when you met him. But he’s okay. I assume you two have known each other for a while?”

“A few decades now. He keeps up on all the latest tech too. He’ll eventually get his report posted in the database. He prefers to talk to us in person because he doesn’t like computers either. I guess we don’t have much in common, not as much as our wives, but a dislike for computers is one example.”

“So, what’s our next play?”

He smiled as her use of “play” reminded him of Mancunians’ love for football. “I think it’s time to interview the shipping company’s owner.”

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“You look like one of those lovely women in *Black Panther*, Sergeant,” Mrs. Drury, the shipping company’s owner, told Dawn. “A beautiful and noble statuesque warrior. You could have been an actor, lass.”

Dawn smiled; Harold frowned. He hoped that was complimentary and not something subtly racist, but he had no idea what the wrinklie was jabbering on about. He nodded to Dawn nonetheless to begin the questions, thinking the old woman might respond better to Dawn than to him. *Let’s me see her interviewing skills too. A good test because Mrs. Drury must be tough if she manages lorry drivers!*

He couldn’t quite get past the wart on her chin or eyebrows that needed some TLC. She reeked of cheap drink and cigarettes, the latter probably the cause of the raspy voice. He could imagine her booting out a drunken lout of a husband to make her own way in life. Yes, she was a tough old bird but obviously a survivor. He admired that, especially in this economy.

“We just need some background on your lorry driver, Mr. George Duncan,” Dawn said. “Did he fill out any personnel forms or present any references when you hired him?”

“Um, normally we keep that under wrap. I hire some blokes who have form, you see. If I think they deserve a chance and are honest about it, I hire them. There’s a lot of turnovers here. The job has long hours for little pay.” She shrugged. “But seeing as how Mr. Duncan can’t complain now, let me see what I have for him.” She went to one of the two wooden filing cabinets that had seen better days and pulled out a folder. She thumbed through its contents. “I have a copy of the required special license; a summary of previous employment and employers; a few other references, including financial ones; and a copy of my offer of employment.”

“Could we have copies of all that, ma’am?”

“All except my offer.” She smiled. “That’s Top Secret ‘cause I don’t want the other drivers to compare what they make with Duncan’s wages. I pay according to experience, of course.”

“Was Duncan experienced? Did you check to see if the documents he submitted were legit?”

She showed them a sheet with a big red X on it. “That means I checked his previous employment. I often don’t waste time on the others. They are all on probation for the first month. In that time, I can tell if they’re the kind of drivers I need.”

“We might look into them. Again, for background. Can you make copies of everything except your offer sheet?”

“Said I could. Don’t see how they’d show a reason for why someone would want to kill him, but if you want to waste your time, they’re yours.”

“Did you recover the lorry he was driving?”

“Don’t you plods know that?”

Dawn glanced at Harold, who took the cue.

“Early days, Mrs. Drury. We’re just getting started.”

“I reported both him and my lorry missing. I had to lease one and give a driver overtime to do Duncan’s routes. He hadn’t even made the first delivery. I have an appointment to look at a used model I might be able to afford. Leasing’s a bitch, and obviously I can’t sit around and wait for your colleagues to find my lorry. I could die first.”

Dawn decided to retrack. “Did you know anything about Mr. Duncan’s personal life?”

“I know where he lived, so he probably had no family—it’s a tip of an area and the flats in his building aren’t much more than bedsits. Damn shame the Council lets people live in squalor like that. Anyway, maybe you can find some more information about him there. The address will be on one of the forms. I don’t really know much about him. He did his routes and deliveries well enough, but he kept himself to himself. Not very friendly with the other drivers, to be honest, but always respectful towards me. I liked the old bloke. No complaints.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Drury. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Where to now?” Dawn said after they returned to their EV.

“Read me Duncan’s address, and I’ll put it into the GPS. That’s where we’re going.”

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“He’s not home,” said the woman who leased the bedsit catty-corner to Duncan’s. Unlike Mrs. Drury, this neighbor tried to look presentable but hadn’t succeeded. She blew a smoke ring towards Harold while eyeing Dawn. “He usually comes off a route and crashes for a while. Haven’t seen him since yesterday morning. Maybe he had a long haul.”

“Did you know him well, Mrs...?”

“Miss. Miss Carla Longo. My Daddy was Italian, but the only thing he left me was the name. And aye, Duncan and I said hi occasionally, but I think he’s gay. Never tried to undress me with his eyes like other men do. And he knew I—um, let’s just say I entertain sometimes.”

“Is there a place where we can find a master key?” Harold said.

“Rental office maybe? I hope not, though. I wouldn’t like the little weasel who runs it to come into my place and snoop around. Besides, you plods will need a warrant to enter George’s place.”

Harold winked at Dawn, and she smiled back. They hadn’t shown their warrant cards to Carla when she’d come out to see who was knocking at Duncan’s door.

“No warrant necessary, Carla. George is dead. We’re investigating his murder.”

She sighed. “I knew that wanker was up to no good. I’ve had nothing to do with any illegal shite he was into. As for a key, look in that planter. I seen him put a key or something in there. Sometimes he lets male friends use his place to kip while he’s on a route. That’s how they got in.”

She entered her flat and slammed the door shut.

“Shall we?” Dawn said, pointing to the fake planter. Not even the dirt was real; it was filled with fake mulch chips like one could buy in a nursery and the plantings were artificial.

Harold put on rubber gloves—he’s need them anyway if they entered the bedsit—and scratched around in the mulch until he found a plastic jar that said “multivitamins.” Instead of pills, it contained a key.

“I wonder if Carla snoops in George’s place when he’s gone.”

“Given what I saw of the size of her place, which must be similar, there wouldn’t be much to see.”

The key worked. Dawn put on gloves too as well as booties and handed another pair of the latter to Harold. They entered the bedsit. A familiar odor greeted them.

"Something died in here," Dawn said. "Not many places it could be hiding except the bathroom."

Sure enough, the body was in the tub. A man's body had once been bathing in a pool of his own drying blood, his throat slit making his expression look like a badly made-up clown's large grin. He looked younger than Duncan. On his shoulder was the familiar lion's-head tattoo, this time without a lightning bolt.

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"Drew, as in Andrew, Ashton," Dawn said to Harold once they'd returned to the station. "Manchester mob. I didn't know him personally, thank God, but one of my old colleagues there IDd him. Insignificant player and mostly a drugs deliverer to street vendors."

"With maybe aspirations to run his own patch?"

"I doubt it. He was a courier. A soldier, not a general. Might have been a friend of George for all we know."

"A twofer from some other gang member. Or not, if George did him and was on the run."

"And then someone caught up with George? We now need a timeline." Harold nodded. "Either theory fits, but they're not all the possibilities. And don't forget about the differences in tattoos. George might have been an old hand here in the northeast; Drew certainly was one in Manchester."

"Do me a favor. Take a DC along with you and go see if Mrs. Drury or Miss Longa knew this fella Drew. Maybe he was a frequent visitor to George's place before he was murdered."

"Or an infrequent one who arrived to threaten George? Okay. I'm on it. My old colleague will try to discover if there's a path for Ashton from Manchester to this area as well."

"Considering what Mrs. Drury told us, it might be that George wanted to leave the gang life. Maybe Drew or someone higher in the pecking order didn't want him to do that."

She smiled. "Or, he just put on a good show to gain the old woman's trust, and the plan all along was to use her lorries to carry product?"

"Um, another theory. We don't need any more. There are a lot of possibilities for two thugs who were living in that underworld. You could just have two gay guys renewing acquaintances. Let's get data to decide which one might be correct."

She flashed another smile. "From what my Mancunian colleague told me, Ashton would feel in seventh heaven with a female harem. He thought he was God's gift to women."

"Not with that clown's smile. Even without it, he's no pretty boy like Tom Cruise."

"It takes all kinds, Harold. Another gang in Manchester was known to use gay fellas as bodyguards for the big boss's daughter. That way he knew she wouldn't be tempted by anyone."

Harry frowned. "Like eunuchs for the emir's harem? I feel sorry for that girl. Times have changed, but some things stay the same, don't they?"

Dawn left Harold's office and visited her desk in the CID's open-plan area for the first time. It had become the CID's tip. She found a bin and pushed off all the wrappers and coffee cups into it. The piles of documents she placed on her one visitor's chair. Her next-door neighbor, DC Ed Pauley smiled at her. She'd had a chance to say hi to him, the only one in that area of the CID, as the DCI and she had walked through on the way to her DI's office.

"The guys thought you might be homesick, so they wanted to make your desktop look like Manchester."

"It's a good thing they're not here then." She eyed him. "Did you participate in that?"

“No. It all affected me negatively as well. The trash started reeking like the lower Thames in summer.”

She remembered that from a secondment she’d had. It was a good metaphor.

“Because you’re the only member of the team here, you’ll accompany me on a little task that Harold assigned me.”

“What might that be?”

“Grab a pool car and meet me in front. I’ll tell you on the way.”

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Mrs. Drury had never seen Drew Ashton. Dawn had shown her a blowup from the man’s Mancunian form. They went on to visit Carla Longo, realizing they could have saved some time if Harold and she had questioned her after finding Drew’s body. Of course, at that time, they’d had no idea who he was.

Carla was taken with Ed, much to his embarrassment, so Dawn wandered around the bedsit looking at photos and books while he questioned her. The slim woman had welcomed them with a tea service after their arrival, which took some time, so Dawn inspected some of Carla’s photos.

“Who’s the man with the mustache?” she asked once Carla had served as mother. “You and he seem friendly.”

“Papa. He passed about ten years ago. Like I said before, the only thing he ever gave me was his name, but Pietro Longo served Her Majesty well. Rattled around in some godawful places, leaving me Mum to raise my brother and me. Some gents shouldn’t have a family ‘cause they’re never part of their lives.”

Dawn knew a lot of male coppers like that. Females too, for that matter.

Ed pulled out the pics and placed them on the little coffee table. “Is this one of the men who you saw using the key to George’s place?”

She studied the photo carefully. “That the man found next-door? Never knew his name. He was one of three. The other two were there one night but left the next morning.”

“When was this?”

“Um, about two weeks ago. Hold on a sec. I’ll check my calendar. I remember I was entertaining a friend.” The latter was said with a sly smile. She went to her galley kitchen, checked a wall calendar, and returned with the exact date.

“They never came back?” Dawn said.

“Only this man you’ve called Drew Ashton.”

Dawn got details: Times Clara had seen Drew and/or the other two, their ins and outs if noted, and descriptions of the two other visitors.

“You didn’t happen to overhear the names of the other two?” Dawn said.

Clara brightened. “I think the bigger man, the handsome one, was Denny, so maybe Dennis? The smaller bloke, the weasel in the three-piece suit, was Chris, so maybe Christopher? Denny was better looking, but Chris had the money, I suppose. Seems like you only get one or t’other nowadays. Have you had that experience, detective?”

Dawn tapped her head. “There’s another important quality you should add to your list: Brains along with practical sense.”

“Oh, I notice that too, because it’s so rare. I haven’t had too much luck in finding a man with even two out of the three, to be honest. Too bad your boss isn’t about twenty years younger. I bet he had all three qualities at that time.”

Dawn had to stifle a laugh. *Harold Gregg could have turned Carla on?* On second thought, she knew he'd done so with at least one woman, his wife of many years.

The conversation wound down, and they bid farewell to Clara Longo.

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Back at the station and at Harold's request, Dawn and Ed attacked the problem of finding out who Chris and Denny were. It wasn't hard. While neither had form, Dawn's Mancunian ex-colleague came up with the most likely suspects, Christopher Hicks and Denny Quigley, using Clara's descriptions as filters.

"They're both on our watch-list. Both have clean sheets because we've not fitted either one to any specific crimes. You know how it goes. But they're guilty of something, by association at least. Get their shirts off and you'd see the Lions' Pride tattoos."

"Not even tax records to go after? Domestic abuse?"

"I wouldn't call either one domesticated. And there's no obvious employment, so forget tax records. It's not a crime to not be on a payroll."

"There is one if its money under the table for illegal activities. And it seems like they might be involved in both our murder cases."

"Hicks would never do the dirty deed himself. He's too smart for that." Dawn smiled, thinking of the third criterion she'd mentioned to Carla. *Of course, brains and practical sense should be used honestly!* She wondered if Carla would care. "So, it's possible that Quigley's the actual assassin. Find him and most likely you'd at least get some useful information."

"Thanks. I'll keep you informed on how this all shakes out."

"Do that. We're very interested if the Pride's ramping up to operate in your area."

"Would NCA get involved then?"

"Maybe. No one here wants that."

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Dawn ran her theory by Ed before reporting back to Harold. He agreed that's what might have occurred.

"But it all could represent a dead end unless we can find this Chris or Denny. I agree with your idea that Denny's probably the muscle, so Chris is more interesting. Let's go run George's friends by Mrs. Drury. Maybe she's seen one of them hanging around her lorry depot. At least we have their descriptions."

As they pulled into an available space just down the street from Drury's business, they both saw a dapper man fitting Hicks's description get into a BMW and drive away. Dawn jotted down the plate number.

"We should follow him," she said.

"Maybe just a look-alike and a coincidence. And I can do something better." He called the duty sergeant and ordered a detain-and-arrest action in the whole area for the BMW and its driver. After he rang off, Harold said, "We'll nick and interrogate him. For now, let's go have a chat with Mrs. Drury. I think she's mixed up in all of this."

The old woman received them but looked pale and lethargic. The two detectives declined tea, mostly for that reason, and took the proffered chairs. Harold went right to the matter at hand. *Let's see if she denies it.*

"Mrs. Drury, when we pulled up in front of your establishment, we saw Christopher Hicks just leaving in his BMW. We'll be arresting him. Can you tell me about his business here?"

She stared and looked at the ceiling as if she were counting the old acoustic tiles probably loaded with asbestos. She then sighed and faced them again. "Initially I thought it was legitimate business, Inspector. We are a shipping company, after all. Mr. Hicks wanted us to do some hauling for his business. George warned me off, but Hicks insisted, backing it up with money, so I gave in. I regret that. I'm prepared to tell you what I know."

"Then I think you'd better come along with us to the station, ma'am," Harold said. "You can ring for your solicitor on the way. From now on..." Harold cautioned her, but her responses from then on were only a simple yes or no.

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Back at the station, Harold and Dawn turned the old woman over to the duty sergeant. "No charges or cell assignment yet. Just log her in and get her sorted in an interrogation room."

The sergeant eyed the old lady, who could have been almost anyone's grandmother. "Will do, Inspector. I'll call when she's ready, sir."

They discovered that Chris Hicks had avoided the net they'd cast. "It will be only a matter of time," Harold said as they settled into his office to wait.

"We've maybe solved this case, Harold," Dawn said. "I'm guessing you'll be happy because you put one over on NCA."

"'Satisfied' might be the better word to use," he said, using air quotes. "Our efforts with the help of your old colleague hopefully have thwarted a major expansion of a notorious Mancunian gang. It at least shows the flaw in the NCA's business model."

"How's that?"

"They focus on UK-wide organized crime; we focus on the local. They lose focus on the players in the game; we don't."

"Aren't both needed?"

"If you're talking about teamwork, we have a long tradition of doing it across police districts. NCA doesn't play well with us, and they're a more recent phenomenon. It's as if we were in the US, and the FBI just started up. Even there, the FBI, a bit like our MI5 and NCA combined, doesn't play well with local law enforcement, but at least they're not the new kids on the block."

Harold's smile was a reaction to Dawn's expression. He could read body language in anyone, even his own detectives. That was another implication that followed the logic of his spiel: Experience, what a lot of NCA agents didn't have, was important.

The custody sergeant appeared at Harold's door. "Mrs. Drury is ready and waiting with her solicitor, Inspector."

He smiled. *Of course, the wrinkle has her personal brief, not a duty solicitor.*

"Sort some tea and biscuits for us, please. They might need it."

Drury's solicitor was an old bloke with a drooping mustache, probably a man of the old school on retainer who did any legal work for the shipping company, from taxes to legal representation in court cases, the latter prep work for a barrister in most cases.

"Good day, everyone," Harold said. He and Dawn shook hands with the honorable Mr. Stevens, and everyone took seats.

"I understand this is more of a dialogue," Stevens said. "You've made no charges?"

"Yes, but we thought Mrs. Drury should have you present just in case," Harold said. "I assume you've had time to discuss things with her."

"I have. My client is an innocent victim."

“Of what? Can you explain, sir? Or perhaps we should let her explain? Please do so, Mrs. Drury. You may consult your brief as necessary. Let me formerly caution you, though.” He went through the entire spiel so that the brief couldn’t possibly complain. “Now, if you will, Mrs. Drury. Please tell us in your own words what occurred.”

She found her voice. “I’ll start at the beginning. We’ve been having financial problems for a while. It’s hard to compete with the big nationwide firms. We ship everywhere in Northumberland but must contract out to go outside the area. You’ve heard the sorry tale enough times in the media and elsewhere, I suppose: Customers think bigger is better, and the big companies squeeze out the little ones. I don’t know which is cause and effect, but that’s what happens. Small companies struggle to survive. When new work comes knocking on my door, I’m tempted to take it. That was an error in the case of what Mr. Hicks was offering. If I’m guilty of anything, it’s for being stupid and looking the other way.”

“When did you find out what Hicks and his friends were shipping?”

“The day one of my drivers dropped a shipping container full of tools and discovered that wasn’t all that was in it. I confronted Hicks’s man Denny. He just told me to just pretend it hadn’t occurred...or else.”

“Did you interpret that as a threat?”

“After what happened to George, why wouldn’t I? I’d already dug myself a hole. Not only was my business in danger, but I was too. So, the hole just kept getting deeper. I didn’t want it to become my grave.”

“So, Inspector, you see that my client was forced to cooperate with some criminals for fear of her life. She’s an innocent participant.”

“How long did you know about this, Mr. Stevens?” Dawn said, her eyes seemingly boring into the lawyer. “Should we consider you an accomplice?”

Harold smiled for both about what Dawn had said and the counselor’s reaction to it.

“I-I-of course not! I only learned about it recently.”

“How recent, Mr. Stevens?” Harold said.

“She just told me today.”

“That’s a lie!” Mrs. Drury said. “You’ve always been a weasel. A cheap one, but worthless most of the time.” Mrs. Drury glared at her brief and turned to Dawn and Harold. “While I can’t blame him,” she said after catching her breath and then sighing, “Stevens knew. George suggested I consult with him. George didn’t want to participate in Hicks’s scheme. I think Hicks had that man Denny kill both George and then Drew Ashton for getting cold feet. Drew was supposed to be the front man, but he dared to tell Hicks that George had reason on his side. I think he wanted out too.”

*Had Mrs. Drury become a mother-figure for the lorry driver and the representative of the gang?* Harold asked himself. *No matter.* “Will you give us a written confession to all this, Mrs. Drury? It’s the best you can do for George and Drew.”

“What will happen to me?”

“Good question,” Stevens said. “My client has been more than cooperative.”

“All we can do is mention to the CPS how cooperative you’ve been, ma’am. They’ll determine the charges, if any.”

“And my company?”

“It depends on the charges,” Dawn said. “I’m assuming it’s been in the family a while?”

“Correct.” There were signs of tears now.

“No matter what the CPS decides, you should consider retirement,” Harold suggested. “You could create a shared-ownership corporation where your current drivers would share equally in the profits, for example. I’m sure George would have liked that.”

She offered up a thin smile and then turned to Stevens. “Do you think you’re able to work something like that up?”

Stevens frowned, but the frown turned to a thin smile. “Of course...for a price. That would go beyond the conditions expressed in my retainer.”

Harold glanced at Dawn who only smiled back at him.



## Holiday Interrupted

“Planning a holiday, Harold?” DS Dawn McCall said at her boss’s door.

DI Harold Gregg put the brochure down and sighed. “My wife has this crazy idea she wants to see Spain. Ever been there?”

Dawn smiled. “I haven’t even seen all of England. I heard Spain is nice, though.”

“Um, they speak Spanish there, damn it, and use all kinds of dialects to boot. In Barcelona, it’s almost French. I can hardly understand all the dialects in English. And forget about that jive and hip-hop shite the Yanks speak.”

She now laughed. “I was just going to say it’s difficult for a Scotsman to understand a Cockney bloke. But I’m sure you’ll find many Spaniards working in the tourist trade who speak perfect English.”

“Better than King Charlie, I hope. Who understands that toff?”

“Again, I’ve never been in the halls of Buckingham Palace, but I suppose so—bland, unaccented, tourist-manageable English. Not a pillock or marra to be found.”

She had to know that he realized she was making fun of some of his local linguistic leanings. They were both detectives, after all. *Damn good ones too*, he thought. “Well, you’re not here to listen to my complaints about my wife’s holiday choice. What’s on your mind, lass?”

Harold had been a copper in Northumberland for years and was now mostly based in the Morpeth substation that enjoyed a comfortable separation from the stations around Newcastle-on-Tyne, policing there complicated by its being the last major port before Edinburgh, Scotland. Dawn was a recent arrival, a parallel transfer from Manchester whose husband had lost his life and she nearly hers in that major regional capital better known for its football fanatics. They’d become partners and headed a solid squad of detectives in a CID that had to solve all sorts of crimes, including the occasional murder.

She wouldn’t leave his holiday planning alone, though. Like a little terrier who clamped onto a leg and couldn’t be shaken off, she kept at it. “Maybe Ireland would be a better choice. A bit farther, though, if you avoid Dublin and go to its west coast and lake district. Beautiful there, I’m told.”

“Don’t they speak Gaelic there, like in Scotland? That’s another foreign tongue!”

“A different type of Gaelic. Welsh is a Gaelic dialect too, in a sense.”

“Forget my wife’s yen to travel. Tell me what’s on your mind and then be gone with you, lass. I’ll not give you overtime for being an amateur tourism planner.”

“I finished my rough draft on our last case. You wanted to see it.”

“Aye, I did say that. Print me out the rough draft, and I’ll look at it tonight and mark it up. It will give me an excuse to ignore my wife’s prattling on about our possible Spanish itinerary. Any port in a—” Harold’s mobile interrupted, but Dawn had enough to complete the adage. “Aye, here’s us on our way there.” He winked at Dawn. “An even better excuse, lass. We have a murder case. Maybe. Go commandeer a pool EV. I’ll meet you in front of the station.”

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The two detectives stared at the mangled body. “What prat said this was a murder?” Harold said to no one but probably echoing his sergeant’s thoughts.

“That would be me, Inspector Gregg.”

A small, thin man dressed in a transit officer’s uniform had left a group of similarly dressed stormtroopers who besotted the area’s commuters and approached the new arrivals. Harold knew him; Sergeant David Hanson had tried to give Harold a speeding ticket one day

when he'd been rushing to a crime scene in his personal vehicle. He'd left from home, and the pillock hadn't been impressed by Harold's warrant card.

"Sergeant Hanson, what an unpleasant surprise to see you and ruin my day."

"It's Lieutenant Hanson now," the cocky rooster said, pointing to his stripes. "I outrank you."

"Only in your wet dreams. You're not controlling this crime scene to my satisfaction, if, as one of your minion's said, it's truly a case of murder. Looks like a classic hit-and-run to me. Who's this woman? Who was she, to be precise?"

"That's your problem, Mr. Gregg," Lieutenant Hanson said, emphasizing the "mister." "And if you were truly a detective, you wouldn't make such pronouncements without inspecting the body. The back of the woman's head is gone. I guarantee that no auto did that kind of damage. The case is all yours. Have fun, Mr. Gregg. You too, Miss."

Harold had one parting barb for the pillock, though. "You too, Mr. Hanson. I'll be lodging a complaint against you for not preserving the crime scene. You could only know about that wound if you've turned over the body."

The transit copper's face turned a dark red that anyone could see even in the dim light, but he said nothing and kept walking away. *Wanker*, Harold thought. *I'll get even for that ticket*. He hadn't had to pay it, of course, but the incident still was an ugly memory.

"I can't say he was a friendly feller," Dawn said with a smile. "History between you two?"

"Never mind. And he's a complete and pompous arse. I meant what I said. I'm lodging a complaint against the eejit." He shook his head. "But assuming he's not imagining things, we've got a murder case to solve. Call our team and get them out here if they're not already on the way. Pathologist and SOCOs as well. If Hanson's right, we might have a lot of work to do."

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A patrol car was soon parked about one-hundred yards up the roadway and another zebra one-hundred yards down, both their blue lights flashing in the twilight and making it even harder to see anything. SOCOs were busy walking their grids, and the pathologist's white tent now protected the body from curious and prying eyes. Harold could see the silhouette of the pathologist inside; he wouldn't want to be disturbed for a while.

Dawn had everything sorted but was still busy on her mobile, so he took a stroll up the road. Maybe fifty yards forward, there were tread marks; someone had braked hard. The tread was wide, so maybe the car had been a heavy saloon car, a petrol hog, not an econo model.

He walked back and found a Scene-of-Crime Officer, a woman who was walking her assigned grid. She frowned at him, obviously not caring for the distraction. *Tough*, he thought. "When you get a chance, officer, get some photos of the tread marks on the tarmac up ahead. They might belong to the hit-and-run vehicle."

"Major Hanson said it wasn't a hit-and-run."

Harold bristled. "That's Lieutenant Hanson, and the arse isn't qualified to clean a loo let alone have an opinion about a crime scene. And he's known to have been wrong before. And maybe the driver of that car walked back here to finish the job of murdering this woman. Just do as I say. Leave the detective work to me."

He continued to walk the way he'd been headed, the pupils of his eyes now dilating as he moved away from the flood lights surrounding the crime scene. Those old eyes were keen, though, and missed nothing. Dawn caught up to him.

"I overheard your chat with Sheila. You were a bit gruff, boss."

“She must learn the difference between a detective and a transit cop. I’ll say no more. But you have something else to say?”

“The pathologist is a bit stumped, Harold. The victim took a heavy round in the back of the head, but there are signs of frontal blunt force trauma as well, as if she’d been struck by a car. He’ll have more for us after he examines the body in his morgue.”

“Um, they always say that, but interesting that preliminary guess. Wait? What’s that?” While she’d been talking, Harold had still been scanning the area. He’d seen something in the lea at the side of the country road. “It’s red, whatever it is.”

Harold made the same SOCO do penance, don her wellies, and wade through the muddy marsh to the object. She held up a red purse. But there was also an empty suitcase not far away. The objects were soon on the tarmac displayed on a plastic sheet so both could be entered into evidence.

Dawn examined the purse and suitcase with gloved hands. “We now have an ID.” She rattled off a name and address. Harold used a stylus to enter them into his mobile. “They’ll have to do forensics on the outsides and insides, though.”

Harold smiled at the muddy SOCO. “Thank you, Sheila. And I apologize. I was a bit brash with you earlier. You folks do a good job, and we always appreciate it.” He turned and walked back towards their EV.

“He’s a gruff old wanker,” the SOCO said to Dawn.

“His bark is worse than his bite. And I’ve learned a lot from him. See you around.”

“Hopefully not when you’re with him.”

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“Got the team sorted?” Harold asked Dawn much later at the station.

“We’ll all be working ‘til ten.”

“Good time to call it a night at that time and have everyone go home.” He winked at her. “And my wife will be already into her BBC shows to distract her from her trip planning. Tell everyone to be here by 8:30 a.m. tomorrow morning for a a briefing to officially launch this investigation. I have a feeling it’s going to be a difficult one.”

“What’s your take so far?”

“I’ll echo the pathologist’s confusion and say that it all depends on the timeline. If the pathologist states that the crash left Patricia Gibbons alive and the shot in the head was to finish her off, the crash could have been intentional. A car and a gun would then be the murder weapons. If just the opposite, then how was she hit in the front by a car while being on the ground?”

“I guess we’ll see tomorrow what the pathology results are.”

“Yes, after the briefing we’ll go to the morgue. Need a lift to the boarding house?”

Dawn’s old car was now with the mechanic. She’d met Harold at a diner for morning coffee, and they’d ridden together to the station.

“No boarding house anymore. I found a flat. It’s not far from that diner.”

“And near the mechanic, I presume?” She nodded. “Well, tell me where the new flat is, and I’ll drop you there. Unfortunately, this case might delay your unpacking.”

“Most of my things are still in storage. I need to figure out where everything goes first so I can tell the movers where to drop things.”

“Smart lady. Let’s go.”

She pointed to his desk. “You forgot your travel brochures.”

“Oh, rest assured my wife has her own copies.”

The briefing the next morning was dedicated to logistics, so it was short. Accepting a few suggestions from the old hands, Harold doled out the assignments. Afterwards, team members dispersed to perform them as well as anything else creative they came up with as things progressed while Dawn and Harold left for the morgue.

The pathologist put to rest all theories but one: The shot in the back of the head was COD. Blood on the suitcase showed it had been used as a stool. They had sat her on it, already dead.

“I don’t understand. Why would someone do that?”

“Maybe wanting to make out like she was hitchhiking?” the pathologist said.

Harold ignored the comment. “Were there any more injuries other than the frontal ones and head wound?”

“Bruises like she’d taken a nasty spill on rocks or some other hard surface. Some rope burns on the wrists and ankles. Cotton remnants in her teeth like she was chewing on a handkerchief. Maybe she was held captive?”

This pathologist, unlike some, had the bad habit of playing detective...at his convenience. But Harold nodded. “Consistent with what I was thinking last night at home. If there were two cars, what could have happened is the following: Miss Gibbons was being held somewhere, they were transporting her, and she managed to roll out of the car. The driver slammed on the brakes—hence the tread marks—got out, returned to poor woman before she could untie herself and shot her. He then perched her on the suitcase, hoping another car would come along and destroy all the evidence by throwing the woman, suitcase, and purse off the side of the road.”

“That’s farfetched, Harold,” Dawn said. “So...you think there’s another car?”

“I’m not claiming the theory is completely correct. Maybe the first car drove around and hit her at full speed again. There are too many unknowns neither our doctor here nor the SOCOs can possibly fill in.”

The pathologist was smiling, though. “It’s consistent with the evidence, though. It explains why the suitcase was empty too. It would go farther being empty.”

Harold nodded. He hadn’t thought of that, and it explained why the woman was only at the side of the road while the purse and suitcase were off in the lea.

“When the SOCOs process it, they’ll find it wasn’t at one time. Drugs, bills, jewels—who knows.” Harold gave a nod to the pathologist. “Thanks. We’ll now go off and try to poke holes in my theory that could be merely a figment of my imagination created by my desire to forget a discussion about Spanish tourism.”

Harold walked out of the morgue.

“What’s that about Spanish tourism?” the pathologist asked Dawn as she too turned to leave.

“His wife wants to have a holiday in Spain. Apparently, he constructed that theory to put that out of mind.”

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“If there is one, we still need to find the bloke that hit the woman after she was sat on the suitcase,” Harold said to Dawn as they headed to the address corresponding to Patricia Gibbons.

“Even if that proves your theory wrong?” she said with a smile.

“Especially if it proves my theory wrong. There might have been only one car, but I don’t see how.”

The flat was one of four on the first floor of a five-story building. On the ground level, there was a lobby where two lifts and a security guard were visible as they walked in. She logged them in and gestured to the right-hand lift. "Repair man is coming for the other one next week...I hope."

Patricia Gibbons had a roomie, Valerie Plimpton. She received the news of her friend's death badly. "How was she killed?"

"We prefer not to reveal details just yet," Dawn said.

*Because we're not certain about what occurred,* Harold thought.

"Tell us about your friend, Valerie," Dawn told the young woman.

Harold nodded. He'd taught his sergeant how to approach the critical questions slowly. She'd arrived with an interviewing technique more appropriate for members of a Mancunian gang. Harold had let Dawn run the interview, figuring Gibbons could relate better to his sergeant, another young woman, than to a copper who was old enough to be her father. So far Dawn was off to a good start.

"Patty liked to live life to the fullest, officers, always bubbly and excited about everything as if every day was a new adventure." She sighed. "Patty could easily chat up the blokes; I never had much luck at that. My steadiest fella was one of her rejects, but I saw the backside of him a while ago."

"When did you last see her?" Dawn said.

"We were at a club in the city last night. She said she was going to sleep it off at her uncle's. I dropped her there. I wasn't surprised when she didn't show up today. She was so wasted, she'd have needed a good lie-in. It's her Saturday to do the cleaning, so I was just about ready to start it when you two showed up."

"You saw her into her uncle's house?"

Valerie thought a moment. "I was a bit pissed myself. No-no, I think I just saw her wave at me through the rear windscreen of the taxi."

"You took a cab all the way here from Newcastle?" Harold said.

Valerie shrank away from him after his interruption. "I-I didn't pay for it. The uncle lives between Newcastle and Morpeth, and Patty had already paid the fare for the entire trip to our flat here. She's rich. She receives a monthly stipend as part of her inheritance. Her parents died in a transit accident. Her Uncle Joe and her father owned two-thirds of a pharmaceutical lab. I'm not sure where that is, to be honest. Jim and Joe, James and Joseph, I guess, were fraternal twins and brilliant chemists. They had several patents between them. They and some other bloke—the CFO, I believe—own the company. That's why Patty's rich anyway."

"So, Uncle Joe has two-thirds of the stock now?"

"No. Patty owns her father's third. For obvious reasons, Patty wanted nothing to do with the company, so he votes her third as well, unless they've gone public. I don't know much about that company."

"Can you give us Uncle Joe's address?"

"Of course. I have it somewhere." She sighed. "Joe and Mabel are good people—old, but nice enough. I think they're Patty's godparents. I should have waited to see if she entered their estate. But I've dropped her there at the main gate so many times without any problem." It seemed that her tears would start again.

"If you'd just get us that address?" Dawn said.

Valerie went to a desk, looked in an address book, and then jotted something down on a pad. She ripped off the top sheet and brought it to Dawn. "I d-don't understand it. How did she end up on that country lane so far from civilization?"

Dawn smiled at Valerie's naivete. Northumberland had more rural lands than urban and suburban, although planners were predicting that one day Newcastle's conurbation would even engulf Morpeth in its sprawl. It was possible that the young woman hadn't been that interested in the magnificent rural vistas at all, but Dawn had to ask.

"Do you know that area?"

"Vaguely. I wasn't the typical little girl into dolls and such. My father had wanted a son. He liked to fish and hunt, so he often took me along. I grew out of it. Better said, I now like it better where there are a lot of people doing a lot of things."

"I see. Were you and Patty always mates?"

She laughed. "Since our first year in school. My parents skimped and saved to put me in a private school in Newcastle. Patty and I were hellions there, I suppose. We also went to university together. I received a hardship fellowship because of my good grades and Uncle Joe's recommendation. Patty paid in full, of course, although it's not all that much for the public universities."

"Did you do the same course of studies and work together?"

"No, ma'am. I'm working in the IT department of a legal firm, the one that handles the pharmaceutical firm's affairs. She was working in a biology lab—a subsidiary, as a matter of fact. We were both smart in our different ways, and we often talked about starting our own business. Not into women's traditional roles in any way."

"Indeed." Dawn handed Patty a card; Harold followed suit. "Thank you for answering our questions. Please contact us if you think of anything that might help our investigation."

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"Do all young women go clubbing to look for blokes nowadays?" Harold asked Dawn as they pulled away from Patty Gibbons's building.

"It's the twenty-first century, boss. We've even had a few female PMs."

"That last one lasted only a few weeks, counting from her meeting with King Charlie to her vote of no-confidence. What's-her-name? Then there's that Theresa something. She had to leave quickly too. Too bad campaigning for Brexit didn't end Mr. Haystack's career as well. That stroke of stupidity makes dealing with continental law enforcement, so important for east coast ports, horribly difficult."

Dawn knew that was just coppers' gossip; her boss rarely had dealings with the EU's law enforcement. "The Iron Lady had quite a run, though."

"Um, there's that. Sign of the times, I guess. The Yanks had that ex-movie star, and we had Thatcher, speaking of fraternal twins. Can't say I liked either one, to be honest."

"You're Labour, Harold?"

"I'm nothing. Can't stand most politicians, Labour or Tory. All I can do is hope they stay out of my life as much as possible. Give me this Uncle Joe's address. We'll pay him a visit. He seems way too involved in both Patricia and Valerie's lives."

They pulled up to the entrance to the estate, and Dawn jumped out to announce them and gain entrance using the intercom. As they drove up the winding gravel drive towards the main house, Harold couldn't help saying, "I guess even the legal drugs business is a money-maker."

They had just finished a case, Dawn's first with Harold, and it had involved an attempt by a Mancunian gang to expand into the selling and distribution of illegal drugs in Northumberland.

She decided that he had a point, though: The estate could have passed as a summer residence for anyone in the royal family, although King Charlie might have felt a bit cramped.

"There's a car park on the far side," Dawn said.

Harold parked right in front. "Let the damn toff see what we police have to drive because he doesn't pay enough taxes."

"That sounds like a Labour party supporter."

"It comes from an old copper who knows these little EVs can't even cover from one end of Northumberland to the other without recharging. I'll take the lead on this one, assuming it's his royal highness, Sir Joseph Gibbons."

"You don't know he's knighted."

"King Charlie knights anyone who's rich, lass. That's about all he's good for."

A butler showed them into a study that was bigger than Harold's entire house. He took a seat in a conversation area over by a huge stone fireplace while Dawn walked around, looking at the books, some of them first editions, and art, some paintings by famous artists. They waited twenty minutes.

"We should have called ahead," she said, at one point.

"It's better to surprise the lord of the manor."

After another five minutes, the door to the study opened and Uncle Joe entered. At least, that's who Harold thought it was.

He walked straight toward Harold. "Joseph Gibbons, sir. What brings you two officers here?"

"Detective Inspector Gregg and Detective Sergeant McCall, sir." Harold offered a handshake, Joe accepted, and then gestured to the seat. "Would you two officers like some refreshments. We're a bit short of help on Saturdays, but my butler can prepare a good mash, and I believe my wife baked some biscuits just last night."

"Thank you, sir, but we don't want to take up too much of your time."

"Marra, it's Saturday. People shouldn't be working on Saturday."

"I'm afraid we have to do, sir." Despite his preconceptions, Harold was liking this Uncle Joe. He wasn't a pompous bastard. And he had a local accent! "To the point, were you expecting a visit from your niece Patty last evening?"

Joe laughed. "Like you two, she just drops in unannounced, usually after a wild night in Newcastle with Valerie. Those two are inseparable and have always been fond of clubbing. I can't imagine how they finished university."

"Yes, it would seem so. She says she left Patty at the main gate last night."

Joe frowned and looked worried. "Let me check. Perhaps Carl drove her home."

"No sir. Valerie and Patty took a taxi from Newcastle. Valerie continued. Patty was going to crash here."

"Like I said, she often does. I'm getting a bad feeling about all this."

"You should. We found her body beside a country lane about fifteen miles from here."

"My Lord! How did she go from here to there? Are you sure Valerie left her at the gate?"

"No reason to disbelieve her. We'll confirm with the taxi driver, of course."

Joe went to a cabinet, found a bottle, and poured himself a drink. He downed the glass's contents in one gulp, swiveled, and faced Harold. "First her parents, now Patty? My God! It's like the family is cursed!"

"Did Patty have any enemies? Boyfriends she's ended relationships with badly? Drugs dealers?"

“Of course not! She and Valerie are hellions, but they’re just typical young women of that age. My wife tried to give good advice, but we live in different times now. Boys and girls get wasted and even fool around because there’s protection available. In our day, Inspector, there’d be a forced marriage if a young woman got pregnant. Now, they can chatter on about the quality of their orgasms. I don’t have to like it, and I have no idea where it all will end—maybe as Huxley’s vision of the future. But...erm, how did she die?”

Harold was wondering who Huxley was but then thought that if Joe knew anything, he was careful about what he said. “We think she was murdered, Mr. Gibbons. That’s why we’re here instead of the transit police.” *As if they’d do any good!*

Joe poured another drink and returned to his chair. “I-I just can’t believe it. Patty was my brother Jim’s only daughter, and, since his passing, she’s been like a daughter for my wife and me as well. Valerie, too, for that matter, because the two were inseparable.”

“I think we must consider, sir, that Patty was taken to get at you. Do you have any idea of who might want to do that?”

“I have enemies, of course. Any businessman does. But even the worst wouldn’t stoop that low.”

“Have you had any calls asking you to pay a ransom?”

“Of course not! And, if I did, I wouldn’t get the police involved. I’d simply pay it.”

Harold stood, and Dawn followed his example. “I’d advise against that,” Harold said. “It could be dangerous for you and your family and often doesn’t guarantee the return of your loved one.”

They handed their cards to Joe and found their way out.

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“Hopefully the team came up with something,” Dawn said on the return trip to Morpeth and their substation.

“No ANPR cameras on that lonely lane, lass, and we don’t have Patty’s mobile. We’ve got *nada, senorita. Mucho de nada.*”

“Practicing your Spanish, boss?”

He saw her smile in the rearview mirror. “Oh my Lord! My wife’s brainwashing me!” He pounded the steering wheel of the little EV. “Okay, there are the tread marks and forensics left, not that I’m holding my breath for results there. Just maybe they got somewhere with those, though.”

They had. The interior of Patty’s purse showed nothing beyond the ID they already had, but the suitcase’s interior had traces of a white powder.

“Probably not Patty’s suitcase then. There’d be no reason for her to have one, to be honest. Must be the killer’s.” Harold thought a moment. “I wonder if she got mixed up in some drugs delivery? That doesn’t make much sense either. She was in the city raising hell with girlfriend Valerie. Did you send the powder to be analyzed?”

“Our hunch was coke, boss. SOCOs sent a sample to the Newcastle labs to confirm.”

“Okay. That might mean that the kidnappers had used the suitcase for a drugs delivery and were reusing it. It also might tell us who they are. But why would some delivery men kidnap her?” *We just generate more questions that need answering!* Harold shrugged. “Who’s looking into the tread marks? Tell him I want to see them.”

“That would be DC Dalton,” the first DC said.

“I’ll call her,” Dawn said.



“Um, Leo, right?” The DC in the office nodded. “Good work. Keep on it. The more we know, the sooner we’ll find Patty Gibbons. I don’t give a rat’s ass about the drugs traffickers now. I take that back. I care if they’re Patty’s kidnappers. Otherwise, they’re the Newcastle Narcotics team’s problem.” Leo left, so Harold turned to Dawn. “In the meantime, scan the pathology reports again. Maybe by now they found some paint residues from the car that hit Patty.”

Dawn gave a nod to Sue Dalton as she left Harold’s office along with a thumb’s up. *What does that mean?* Harold thought. *That I’m in a raging mood so Dalton had better stay calm? Or, that I’m in a good mood and ready to listen?* He realized that his new sergeant had gotten close to the other team members and now might have a better rapport with them than he did. *That’s not a bad thing*, he decided.

Harold pointed to a chair and sat himself behind his desk as well. “Please tell me, lass, that you have something on those tread marks for me.”

“I do, boss. The car’s most likely a recent model four-door BMW sedan. A heavy vehicle, just like you suspected.”

“I suppose there are a million of them in our area.”

“Not with a balding, front right tire and a missing doorknob from the left rear seat’s door.”

“So, not a million, but a hundred?”

“Only two that turned off the motorway into that country lane, boss. There’s an ANPR camera at the junction, and we could observe that two cars slowed for the turn.”

Harold remembered the turn, thinking the GPS had failed him. He hadn’t seen the camera. He smiled and then slapped the desktop in glee. “Now you’re talking! Who owns those behemoths?”

“One belongs to the Lord Mayor. His estate is on another side road that forks off that country lane about five miles along or so. I think we can count that car out to. The last one remaining was stolen from a car park in Durham about a month ago.”

“That’s got to be the killer’s!”

“Or just someone else’s who’d stolen it?”

Harold demurred a bit to come back to Earth. “Okay. Point taken. Contact the Durham lads and see what they have on that theft. By the way, what color was the car?”

“Dark blue. Is that useful?”

“Patty Gibbons was hit by a car after she was shot in the head. They sat her atop that suitcase. I’m hoping there are some paint residues where she was hit. If there are and they’re dark blue, it’s probably the same car.”

“And if not?”

“What would you conclude, DC Dalton?”

“That two cars were involved?”

“Go to the head of the class.”

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The lab only had a few paint specs to analyze, but they declared that they matched the color of the BMW, even its make and model. “We get the yob who stole that car, and we’ll have our killer,” Harold said pounding his fist into his palm at the late afternoon briefing. “Let’s find him.”

“The Durham police have a fairly good facial, considering it was a security cam,” said Sue.

“Did they look through HOLMES for a match?” Dawn said.

“Not yet. They didn’t give recovering the car a high priority. They’re stretched thin down there.”

“Who isn’t?” Harold said. “That’s on us, then.”

“We can use that new software that correlates a facial pic with arrest records, boss,” Leo said.

“Okay. I have no idea what that means, but go for it. I have a friend at Durham PD. I should have thought of him. I’ll give him a ring. I bet all the circumstances concerning the carjacking haven’t made it into the report yet. I’ll be in my office if anything needs my attention. Let’s keep everything going for now. Check calls made to and from Uncle Joe’s place, Patty’s mobile, and so forth. Friend Valerie who might not be a friend, or a jealous one. And so forth. Let’s shake the tree hard. The rotting fruit will fall.”

“I’m off to grill the owner of the club, boss,” Dawn told him.

“Take that other DC, Andy. I know the place. Definitely not in the best neighborhood of downtown Newcastle. Do you think there’s something there?”

“Unlikely, but I keyed on the fact that the club called the taxi for the two girls. If Valerie’s story is true—just a drop-off for Patty—then it’s unlikely that anything was wrong at that end, but we should check.”

He nodded. “Unless whoever called heard the plan to drop off Patty and saw his chance. You never know. Yes, it’s better to eliminate the possibility. Don’t dawdle, though. I need you to keep things marching along here.”

“You could go.”

“I used to be in one of Newcastle’s nicks. I already know that city far too well. Time you did too, lass. Keep your eyes and ears open. Tell Andy that too.”

Harold had just hung up after calling Durham PD when Leo appeared. Harold waved to a seat and jotted down the information from Durham. His contact thought that the carjacking was done by a teen. They were after a gang of kids who stole vehicles and drove them to a variety of chop-shops for parts. They’d been in operation for about three months. When he wrote that, Harold underlined teen. He couldn’t imagine a car thief kidnapping a young woman, but it was certainly possible. *If so, what went wrong?*

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“Have something?” Harold said to Leo.

“Three candidates with confidence level higher than seventy-five percent.”

“What does that mean?”

“The likelihood that the match is correct. Think of odds that a horse will win a race.”

All three were teens, and one of them was a lass. *What’s this world coming to?* “Okay. Split up and bring them all in for questioning. I don’t care about their carjacking, but it’s possible one of them is Patty’s murderer.”

“Um, boss, they’re all under eighteen. The girl is fifteen and the two lads are sixteen. We need to have a parent or guardian present.”

“Bollocks! That will take longer.” Harold sighed and shrugged. “So be it. Bring a parent or guardian along too. Might as well get to know the arses who can’t control their brats! Oh hell, put out a BOLF for the kids and let the PCs in Newcastle corral them, then sort the parents. That will probably take us until tomorrow. Tell everyone in the team to get a good rest tonight, and we’ll start again tomorrow morning at seven.”

Leo left. Dawn called.

“Any luck?”

“Wasted trip. All the PC had to put in his report was that the club owner called the taxi, and the driver is known to Uncle Joe. He takes Joe to the airport sometimes. We’re heading back.”

“Have Andy drive. Call me when you’re on the road. I want to discuss a few things.”

Harold wanted to follow his own advice: He needed a good rest as well. But he didn’t want to go home yet and get another earful about the marvelous sites to see in Spain. Nevertheless, he started to gather things together as he waited for his sergeant to call back.

“I take it the team came up with something?” she said amidst the sounds of the city that had filtered into the little EV Andy was driving.

Harold told her about the car-theft ring and the results from the facial recognition. He couldn’t remember the technical terms for the latter, but he got the message across. “I’m a bit flummoxed, to be honest. My first worry is less complicated than the second: Why would a young car thief kidnap a young woman? That doesn’t make sense. Second: If memory serves, even an experienced driver would find it hard to turn a large BMW saloon around on that narrow country lane, come back beyond Patty perched on that suitcase, and turn around again to gun the engine.”

There was silence on her end for a moment. “I agree. It wouldn’t be easy. And why bother? Why try to make it look like a hit-and-run? I suppose that part might be a stupid kid’s ploy, though.”

“There’s that. And, in any case, it might be a delay tactic. Transit was first on the scene. Hell, if that prat Hanson hadn’t turned the body over, or it had been thrown into the sea with the purse and suitcase, we might have not been called until much later.”

“Let’s see what we get from the dragnet tomorrow.”

“Have Andy drop you off at your place. You can explain what the hell a ‘dragnet’ is when I pick you up tomorrow morning. We’ll get an early start. I have a hunch some irate parents or guardians are going to be worse to handle than their brats.”

“See you bright and early then.”

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Adults responsible for the three suspects weren’t available for various reasons, so an enterprising DC had “volunteered” three representatives from social services familiar with the suspects sketchy backgrounds. They eliminated the girl right away. Her pimp had the brilliant idea one night to steal a wanker’s car left running in front of a liquor store. She’d spent the night in jail until the police determined she hadn’t directly participated in the car theft. The pimp went to jail.

A pimply brat of fourteen wasn’t even clear about where Durham was. He’d begun his car-jacking career stealing his aunt’s car. After several others, he’d become a mechanic and lived a normal if squalid life. While it was possible he received stolen cars and broke them down, Dawn and Harold didn’t think he was the one.

The third suspect was just stupid. He bragged about stealing the car in Durham. “I was going to get a good dosh for that one, marra,” he said. “But I hit sumpin’ and messed up the front. Didn’t get much for it after that.”

His social services rep just shook her head sadly after that confession laced with teen pride, but then managed to add, “That confession should lessen his sentence, right, Inspector?”

“We’ll see. Benji, where did you hit something? Do you recognize this road?”

“Nah. I was driving along with just the running lights, boss. Came up fast, it did. I didn’t see the damage until I got to the shop. My usual contact gave me shite for the damaged car. I guess it must have been something big.” He thought a moment. “I think I took a short cut I know about. A narrow lane just off the motorway.”

Dawn placed a smaller version of their map in front of the suspect and pointed to the X on it. “Might it have been there?”

“Don’t know much about maps, lady. If that bigger road is the motorway, could be. Who the fuck cares? I don’t think it was a cow. Maybe a woolie? Someone might have had a nice mutton stew from it.” He laughed.

Harold looked disgusted but addressed the woman from social services directly. “The lad will be charged with car theft. Some constables will get it all sorted. Will you take charge of him then?”

She sighed. “Depends on the charges. We’ll have to look at his history. He might be spending some time in juvenile lockup.”

“Hey! I’ve stolen cars before. I was remanded to you folks. You can’t change the rules now! That’s not fair.”

Harold shook his head, nodded to Dawn, and they left the interrogation room.

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Harold was in a foul mood.

They were back at square one. Catching an underage car thief didn’t solve Patty Gibbons’s murder. Moreover, because the tread marks didn’t match the stolen car’s tires, they didn’t know if the BMW making the marks was even blue. And it was not one of the two that had turned off the motorway. It must have reached the crime scene some other way.

For that reason, he was staring at a wall map Dawn had taped to their crime board. The others had trickled out after the briefing, back to any investigative work they could think of doing, leaving Dawn and Harold alone.

“Where’s this smaller lane here come from?” he said, pointing to a dark ribbon that seemed to wander a bit and then enter an estate or lot to about three or four miles in from the crime scene and then disappear at the margins. “Maybe that property has two entrances?”

“Give me a few seconds.” She began swiping and punching keys on her iPhone. “Okay. It’s the main entrance to some riding stables. Our map doesn’t show it, but looking at the detail on my mobile shows it becomes even narrower, continues through the property, and exits onto our lane.”

Harold nodded. “Thank you, Google Earth, or whatever. And I guess the turnoff from the motorway for it has no nearby ANPR cameras. The driver of that second BMW knew the area well, it seems. Maybe too well because someone educated him. Does anyone live at those stables?”

“Let me check. It’s often the case that there’s some kind of crew that visits from offsite. The toffs can come and go as they please and take their horses out for a ride. But they don’t have to worry about giving the creatures room and board. Someone is paid to do that.” Another flurry of iPhone typing and finger swaps. “Yes. There’s heavy security too. That makes sense. Some of the nags are often worth a lot of money. I suspect the video feeds go to some offsite monitoring station as well.”

“Okay. You or someone else should chase all that down to see if our BMW took that shortcut across that property.” He thought a moment. “Is it possible that Patty Gibbons was kept

there? Maybe they decided to move her, thinking that some kid who wanted to ride his pony might spot her.”

“I’m going to check that too. Maybe that BMW was there all the time, and just left via that back gate.”

Harold gave her the thumb-up. “Not square one anymore, lass. I’ll look into another idea I just had. Does rich Uncle Joe own horses? If he does, does he keep them there at those stables? I didn’t see any barn or stables at that posh estate of his.”

Dawn smiled. “I hadn’t thought of that. But neither he nor his wife own a BMW.”

“What about brother Jim? Does someone have to change a car’s registration when its owner dies?”

“Doesn’t all property become part of the deceased’s estate? Especially something as expensive as a BMW saloon car?”

“I don’t know. And that’s a question for the solicitor who settled the parents’ estate. And here’s something else: If memory serves, they both died in the same car. There’d certainly be at least one more for the wife, or two, if Patty drove.”

“She didn’t. Transit cancelled her license. Speeding infractions, DUIs, and so forth. Apparently, she learned nothing from her parents’ accident.”

“Goes with the wild reputation, I suppose. Doesn’t mean she deserved to be murdered. Let’s check on the parents’ vehicle situation.”

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It turned out that the deceased Uncle Joe not only had three horses at the stables, and he’d owned the stables. Moreover, the wife’s BMW had never been sold as part of the parents’ estate. No one knew where it was. The car in the accident had been an expensive Rover.

“We’d checked that. My bad.” Dawn looked sheepish.

“We were looking for BMWs, not Rovers and not hidden BMWs. Any word from the SOCOs?”

They were going over a Morris that they’d found in a barn. It was also clear that someone had been living in the loft. Harold hoped forensics would show that person had been Patty to prove his theory.

They’d served the warrants to Aunt Maddie and were waiting for Uncle Jim to arrive at the mansion from his place of work. When he did, he didn’t receive them warmly. He waved the warrant he’d grabbed out of his wife’s hand.

“This warrant had to be served to me! No one else!”

Harold smiled. “If you’d bothered to read it, sir, you would have noted it says, ‘To Madelaine Gibbons or James Gibbons.’ It’s an ‘or’ and not an ‘and.’ But never fear. We wouldn’t have let either of you near the stables. They tell me your brother’s horses are quite handsome beasts, by the way. I wonder why there are three, though. Did Patty ride?”

“When she was younger. We all did. The four adults and Patty. Good times, sir.” He sunk into a chair and sighed. “Why are you two here then and not at the stables?”

Harold waved his mobile. “We can hear what they find, sir. Modern technology. I prefer to be here to make an arrest if needs be.”

“What? Who are you going to arrest?”

Harold smiled. “I think you know. By the way, trading your sister-in-law’s BMW for an old Morris doesn’t say much about your business acumen.”

“What? What Morris? What the hell are you talking about?”

"I'll tell you when we dive into your financial records some more, sir. Either you kidnapped your own niece to write off a ransom payment you'd never make, or someone else did and was forcing you to pay a ransom that you decided not to pay, which got Patty killed. Which is it?"

"I'll say nothing without my solicitor present."

"James, tell them for God sakes, or I will."

"Oh, stuff it, Maddie! You caused all this. You and Jim's wild daughter."

"Mr. Gibbons, I believe you're correct. We'll take you both in and interrogate you separately. You'll be allowed to call your lawyers."

"They're the same, Inspector."

"Then he'll just have to dance from interrogation room to interrogation room. Do we need to handcuff you?"

"Of course not," Uncle Joe said. "And after this is cleared up, I'm going to sue you two and all the detectives at Morpeth station." He turned to his wife. "And you too!"

Once back at the station, they separated husband and wife. The solicitor appeared with another because Maddie Gibbons had hired a personal one on the fly. She obviously didn't trust Joe's. Harold thought that was smart but her attitude since the confrontation at the family mansion had left Harold with the niggling thought that she wasn't just the meek housewife subservient to her brilliant husband. *Maybe she has her own agenda?* That made him place her second on his list to interrogate.

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After turning on the recorder, mostly ignoring the solicitor, and cautioning Joe, Harold went after the biochemist.

"It seems that you don't know what goes on at your own stables," he said.

"I haven't been there for a while. Patty lost interest as well. In fact, I was thinking about selling it and the horses. It would have gone for a nice piece of change."

"To add to Patty's inheritance?"

"No, that's all mine. Jim left me the horses and the property. More for Patty, of course, until she became more interested in spreading her legs for any handsome beau she picked up downtown."

"That's a bit crass, Mr. Gibbons," Dawn said. "She's your goddaughter."

"Well, Jim spoiled her, not me. It's a wonder she made it through university. She'd go through anything she made at her job and then some. Her friend was much more concerned about the poor and the hungry. Patty didn't give a shite."

"Valerie paints a different picture of your goddaughter," Harold said. "Certainly not Mother Teresa, but good-natured and full of life."

"Maybe with Valerie. She only gave me grief. Maddie would defend her sometimes, but Patty was like a wild mare that was never ridden." He sneered. "At least in the meaning of untamed. She obviously enjoyed a good shag."

"Did your brother Jim have such a bad opinion of her?" Dawn said.

"Let's get one thing straight. I was the brains behind our company; Jim was the daydreamer who wanted to save the world. He would have liked Patty and Valerie to do the same. Patty held Valerie back, though."

"Sometimes we tolerate the actions of others because they are good friends," Harold said. "Can you tell us what happened to the wife's car after the accident?"

That question caught Joe by surprise. "Wha-What's that got to do with Patty's murder?"

Harold smiled. "A BMW was used in the kidnapping. Which brings us to the key question: Phone records for your landline show several calls from a pay-as-you-go phone. Who answered those calls, sir? And did they ask for you to pay for a ransom?"

Joe frowned and then looked at his solicitor, who shook his head in the negative. "You-you are jumping all over Northumberland, reaching for any clue, Inspector. No comment."

"As your solicitor well knows, it's not against the law when someone receives a ransom demand and doesn't report it to the police. It's probably the main reason for an abductee's murder, though." Harold made a show of leafing through some notes. "For reasons I can't discuss, we believe that wasn't the reason Patty died, at least not directly. There is a reason the kidnapper or kidnappers didn't stay at the stables, though, so it would help us to know it." He eyed the toff. "Please understand, Mr. Gibbons, that our interest is in finding who killed your goddaughter. We can't worry about her wild lifestyle or lack of concern for the less privileged. Someone held her at the stables. We have forensics evidence to prove it. We can piece together how her body came to be in that lane." He slammed a palm on the table. "But whoever was holding her at the stables did so because they were told it was a good place to hide her! Was that someone you? And, if not, who?" Harold had refrained from stating the obvious alternative. If not Joe, the solicitor would piece together that the alternative would be Maddie Gibbons. "No more questions for now. End session. Use the time, gentleman, to discuss the situation. We'll return."

"You think he's protecting his wife, right?" Dawn said.

"Actually, I don't know what to think, lass, but they're our two obvious suspects because they knew about the stables. Have the DCs found out if Valerie knew about them?"

"She did. But she never went riding there. She had a fear of horses from childhood. Fell from a pony when she was six and broke a leg. I saw the NHS records."

"Um, interesting. Doesn't say she couldn't have told the kidnappers about the stables, though. Something to keep in mind. Maybe we'll bring her in for interrogation if we get nothing from these two. I have a hunch, though, that Maddie Gibbons might not be so successful at being as circumspect as her husband. Go see what the DCs found out about her personal finances if anything. We're just assuming Joe pays all the bills, but maybe not."

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Dawn and Harold had tea and biscuits in the canteen before interrogating Maddie, leaving Maddie and her solicitor an extra five minutes. When they entered the interrogation room, Harold decided the woman's solicitor, another woman, looked less professional compared to the husband's. She obviously couldn't afford more attorney's fees, or she didn't want to.

He opened with the usual bureaucratic nonsense required by the CPS for recordings: recorder on, date and time, cautioning to the person interrogated even though there were no charges yet, and a list of those present.

"We're here," he said, to begin the real session, and as much for the lawyer as for Maddie, "in regard to the murder of Patty Gibbons, godchild of Joseph and Madelaine Gibbons." He shuffled some inconsequential papers to organize his plan of attack. "Mrs. Gibbons—may I call you Maddie?" She nodded, a sullen expression bordering on a glare on her face. "Maddie, we have evidence to show that Patty was being held at your husband's stables prior to the murder. Subsequently, she was then taken away in a BMW. Do you know anything about those events?"

Her expression softened and she looked down at the table as if she were studying its many fag burns, coffee and tea rings, and scratches. "No comment."

“Do you know how James and his wife’s estate was settled?”

That caught her by surprise, but she recovered quickly. “Ask Joe. Look, why am I here?”

“For now, your husband and you are here because we’re looking for information. Neither of you is cooperating, in fact, and that impedes our investigation. What happened to your sister-in-law’s BMW, Mrs. Gibbons? Was ownership settled as part of the estate settlement? We have no record of that. If so, who became the new owner? You, your husband, or someone else?”

“Ask Joe. I had nothing to do with that.”

“Could it be that the BMW that left the stables with your godchild was the other Mrs. Gibbons’s BMW that was somehow kept out of the settlement?”

“No comment.”

“I see that you’re not very aware of that settlement’s details, or, at least, you don’t want to talk about it. What about your husband’s financial situation?”

“Ask him.”

“Why is that, Mrs. Gibbons? Until death do us part and all that, you know. Did you not want to know about either one?”

She sighed, looked at her solicitor who nodded, and then studied the tabletop again, mumbling, “I guess you’ll find out soon enough. We signed a pre-nuptial agreement when we married.”

“That was decades ago. Never bothered to change it?”

“Twenty-two years. He wanted to keep his business deals to himself, although I suppose Jim knew about them, and I’d inherited a lot of money that I wanted to control. Simple as that. There’s no big mystery there, Inspector.”

“We’ve investigated that a bit. He inherited the stables from Jim as well as controlling interest in the business, and you now each own half the property where you now live. That’s all a bit unusual, considering such a long marriage.”

“It’s as equitable as I need it to be.”

“So, you do know something about your husband’s financial situation,” Harold said with a smile, enjoying his small victory. “And how his brother’s estate was settled.”

“Not all the legal details. I’m not all that interested. And I know nothing about that BMW.”

*Interesting that you return to that!* “When was the last time you visited the stables, Maddie?”

“I can’t remember.”

Now her brief interrupted. “I can’t see that these questions are going anywhere, Inspector. Can you wrap this up, please? I have other business calling for my attention.”

Harold shuffled his papers again, but then there came a knock at the door. It opened a bit, and a DC stuck her head in a moment. “Have a few seconds, Inspector?”

He nodded. “Take over, Dawn.”

“Inspector Harold Gregg is leaving the interrogation room,” Dawn announced for the benefit of the recorder.

In the corridor after he closed the door behind him, Harold received a sheet of paper.

“Mrs. Gibbons’s finances, boss. Interesting data.”

Harold scanned the sheet. “Except for a few cancelled credit card accounts—her credit record must not be too good—and a few long-term bonds that haven’t matured, the woman’s destitute. Who received these large bank checks, and what were they for?”

“Explained on the reverse, boss.”



He flipped the sheet over and read the hand-written data. “Okay, two were written in favor of that new casino down in Durham. That’s interesting. The other was made out to a bloke named Giancarlo Rotoli. Any idea who he is or what he does? Does he have form, for example?”

“Nothing too serious after the dust settled. A clever barrister helped him avoid a murder sentence on technicalities. He has a few minor offenses as well and spent some time inside as a juvenile. We can’t access that record, of course.”

“Let’s bring this man in. Thanks for this. It’s just what I need—some leverage.”

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By the time he sat again, Harold’s mind was cruising in overdrive. “As luck would have it,” he told the brief, “we have just received some new evidence. We might have to charge your client, but not yet. Let’s continue. Where were we?” He knew where he was going, of course.

“If you charge Mrs. Gibbons, Inspector, I must see the charge sheet.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t want to deprive you of such salacious reading material. Now Maddie, I understand you’re often in Durham?”

She turned pale and hung her head. *The top of the table is now even more interesting?* “No comment.”

“A few years ago, they opened a new glitzy casino there. Lots of controversy, both sides battling it out, but it opened. Jobs in a bad economy and all that were the arguments for it, I believe, although I always saw the situation more because of Brexit. Out of curiosity, I went there for a few drinks once. I’m not a gambler, so I wasn’t impressed.”

“Get to the point, Inspector,” the solicitor said.

“Yes. To the point, because you have other business pending. Maddie, have you ever visited that casino?”

“No comment.”

His palm slapped the table, startling her. “I believe you have! I doubt anyone would count the two substantial payments you made to *The Silver Unicorn* as a charitable donation. Weren’t they for gambling debts you incurred there? We can answer that question easily enough, but, since your legal representative is short on time, it would be easier for all concerned if you did so now.”

“No comment.”

“Very well. And how do you know Giancarlo Rotoli?”

Now she began to shake. She looked at him. Tears filled her eyes. “It’s all his fault! He got her killed!”

“He, meaning Giancarlo?”

“No, Joe. Ask him.”

“Inspector, I must ask you for some time to confer with my client.”

“I don’t have to allow that—we’ve made no charges yet—but go ahead. I’ll give you twenty.”

“That was a bit of timely luck,” Dawn observed in the corridor after interrupting the session and closing the room’s door. “She’s a basket case. Do you think she’ll confess?”

“Yes. To what, I don’t know. Perhaps the gambling debts were the motivating factor. I just don’t see either Maddie or Joe as a killer, though. Maybe indirectly. We need to find this Giancarlo. And maybe an accomplice. Whatever they admit to having done, it’s a sure bet that he’s involved.”

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The situation turned out to be more complex than either detective could have imagined.

Maddie had been afraid Joe would find out about her gambling debts, so she arranged for Patty to be kidnapped so her husband would pay a ransom that she could then use to pay off those debts. When he refused, things had spiraled quickly out of control because Giancarlo and his accomplice still wanted to be paid.

Afraid that either Joe or the police would discover that Patty was being held at the stables, Maddie told Giancarlo to move her. Giancarlo told Maddie what had happened and threatened to blame everything on her: Patty had taken matters into her own hands, rolling out of the BMW on the way to a new hideout, making Giancarlo furious. He'd shot her execution-style and then staged the fake hit-and-run.

Maddie would face serious charges; they'd have to be more careful with Joe because he'd only refused to notify the police and knew nothing about his wife's plotting.

"Do you believe them?" Dawn said to Harold when they'd returned to her office.

"We interrogated them separately, and their stories hang together. It's just her word against Giancarlo's for a first-degree murder charge, so we must find that wanker."

"She said he had an accomplice. Maybe he'd grass on them both?"

"We need to find him too. Both might be long gone. On the ferry or through the Chunnel, maybe even into Eastern Europe by now."

"Or Scotland or Ireland?"

"Um, Edinburgh's a possibility. Add them to the list of ports we're checking. For now, let's visit Giancarlo's residence. It's in Blyth. Let's take a ride, lass."

Blyth was a town north of Newcastle and almost due east from Morpeth. They parked about two blocks away on another narrow street.

"This area's a bit rundown," Dawn observed.

"So the cost of a lease will be minimal. Lots of people out and about. The economy's bad, and we see the evidence for that. Not everyone can work for the big oil companies. And Norway's are lording it over ours now after Putin turned them into the better bet."

She winked at her boss. "You read a lot, don't you?"

He nodded. "More than I should. I can't stand the BBC, but I need and like to keep up with news about the UK and the world. The Home Office gives us nil, lass. We're always the proverbial mushrooms: Kept in the dark and get shite poured on us. This wanker's name's not here. Guess he moved on."

"Or he didn't want to advertise who lives in 4C. That'll be in the back, by the way. Should we split up just in case?"

"Flip for the back?" Dawn lost. "Probably an omen. You'll just be welcomed by garbage bins, and here's me hoping there's a damn lift."

Dawn had a niggle, a bad feeling that they might wish they had backup. "Be careful, Harold. This yob's a murderer."

"Aye, but I'm betting that he's long gone. That's the logical conclusion to make for the absence of his name on the intercom. I think it will take you about the same time to get situated as it will for me to go up in a lift. You'll win if there's no lift. I guess that would be my exercise for the day. My wife's always hounding me about getting more."

He entered the lobby, heading for the lift; and she headed for the back of the building.

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Harold rapped on the door to Giancarlo's flat. On the third knock, a man flung the door open; another pushed the first into Harold, sending both sprawling. Harold managed to get a good blow in on the man on him and push him away. He crashed through the railing bordering

the landing for the stairs and elevator. Harold didn't worry about his health, jumping up to face Giancarlo Rotoli.

The man they were looking for was unarmed, but he caught Harold by surprise again. A feint to his left was followed by a right hook that put Harold down for the count. He was conscious enough to realize that Giancarlo had headed back inside, slamming the door. By the time Harold rose and tried the door, he found it locked and heard scurrying sounds inside. *Now I've got you, you bastard!*

Harold put a shoulder to the door but failed to break in. He found his mobile and called for backup while wondering if there was a way for the scrote to do a runner from the rear of the flat. It was time to make sure Dawn was okay there.

He took the lift, figuring it was dangerous on the stairs, which would be faster, because his head was spinning. *Symptoms of concussion?* The thought made him angrier, but when he exited the lift and saw the crumpled body of the accomplice, it made him feel better. He didn't even bother to put handcuffs on him. He was either dead from a broken neck—his head looked a bit askew—or he would be out for a while.

He ran towards the back.

Once there, he saw that Dawn was facing off against a knife-thrusting Giancarlo. She had her constable's wand and knew how to use it. Giancarlo knew she did, and he was as wary of the wand as she was of the knife. She was sprier than her assailant, though, so Harold couldn't help admiring the lethal dance for a few seconds. Then he decided to end it.

He picked up a half-full refuse bin and used it as a shield, running towards Giancarlo. He wasn't about to meet the killer face-to-face, though. When he was near enough, he tossed the heavy bin towards Giancarlo's head.

Dawn used the distraction to move in. The wand smashed across Giancarlo's brow and put him down. She put the cuffs on him.

She caught her breath a moment and then smiled at him and said, "Inspector Harold Gregg, we make a damn good team!"

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It took a while, but they eventually got the evil quartet's story straightened out. For James and Maddie, it followed their version. Harold played off Giancarlo and his accomplice against each other. Both claimed the other had shot Patty Gibbons, but it turned out that the accomplice's prints and DNA weren't on the gun, only Giancarlo's.

"This turned out to be the cock-up of all cock-ups. I must be getting old, lass. I never could have imagined that Patty's godparents had anything to do with her murder."

"I never considered Uncle Joe either, Aunt Maddie even less," Dawn said with a nod. "Don't beat yourself up, Harold."

"Preconceived notions, lass. They're the bane of good police work. Me, I might be old, but I'm never too old to learn. And you've got this case to remind you as well: Investigate everything and everyone. In our defense, the unraveling of Maddie's scheme happened so quickly that we would have had to be real oracles to see what was going on. A young girl died because of that."

"It'll be nice for you to have a break, Harold."

"I wouldn't mind Spain so much if I could just lie around on a beach somewhere. Instead, we're going to do a Spanish art and culture tour. If I have to learn about El Greco, shouldn't I at least be going to Athens?"

She laughed. "It will be fun, boss. A good distraction from all of this."

“I suppose I owe it to my wife. She puts up with a lot. Just make sure to keep me updated. I could use a good excuse to return if another murder case needs solving.”

“I wouldn’t think of doing that to your poor suffering wife. Besides, I’m going to take a few days off to go to wine country.”

“Um, that’s a bit farther than Spain, lass. Tuscany, Italy? Bordeaux, France?”

“Our wine country, Harold. Southern England. Global warming has made it a great place for vineyards. And it has beaches as well.”

“Um, I wish I could convince my wife to go there instead. At least they’d speak English.”

## The Detective in the Three-Piece Suit

Brian Fitzsimmons had dressed for the funeral just like he usually dressed for work—many colleagues considered the latter overdressed in his black-and-gray-striped three-piece suit and even better dressed than the undertakers who'd driven the hearse from the funeral parlor to the cemetery. His police companions varied in their dress, of course, the seriousness of their expressions mostly independent of their attire and determined by how well they'd known Brian's sergeant.

His expression was perhaps the most serious among them, only second in seriousness to the long-suffering widow's. Her suffering wasn't because Detective Sergeant Colin Camp had been a bad husband or terrible father; it was because what he had done for a living had been responsible for ending his life: He'd taken a bullet for Brian. In a way, that had been foolish and unnecessary, almost a rookie mistake, especially at the beginning of an investigation.

Colin had helped Brian to winnow out the wanker from other candidates they'd suspected of raping and murdering a fourteen-year-old girl. In fact, Colin had done a lot of the grunt work. With children of his own, it had become almost an obsession for the stout sergeant.

Brian still asked himself why the man couldn't have waited a bit longer. The inspector had arrived at the scene, ran towards the two struggling men, sergeant and scrote, only to see Colin pistol-whipped to the ground. Brian had known his time might have come but still moved in as the rapist-murderer leveled the gun at Colin. But the yob turned and was aiming at Brian when Colin attacked again. When the gun fired, the bullet meant for Brian had hit Colin.

Brian couldn't bear to face the widow or her children. He had no family—hadn't had one since his young mother had passed on and his old father had sent him off to boarding school and then died of a heart attack—but Brian knew Colin's had been important to the burly sergeant. He watched stoically as the gravediggers started shoveling dirt onto the coffin, wondering what Mrs. Camp was thinking. She'd never blamed him. *Maybe she thinks I blame myself enough? She would be right!*

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Two weeks or so after the funeral, Brian looked up at the replacement for his old sergeant and tried to flash a welcoming smile. It wasn't easy. *I suppose I deserve this?*

Detective Sergeant Helen Clarkson was a frumpy older woman who could have gone undercover as someone's cleaning lady. Her clothes were logical and practical enough: Anything better would have looked out of place. She seemed to be pleasant enough as well. *But is she a good detective?*

"I suppose our DCI brought you up to date on what happened to my old sergeant?"

"It's a tough situation, Inspector Fitzsimmons, especially for Sergeant Camp's family. I realize that. I made the parallel transfer here to be nearer my own family. I realize the emotional wounds, especially for your old sergeant's family, might still be a bit raw, though."

*One way to describe it.* "You have a good record for your work in the Midlands Police District, even in some rather seedy areas around Birmingham center. Who's replacing you?"

"No one, I suspect. They're into that budget-cutting mode of reducing-personnel-by-attrition. They suggested retirement in my case; I demurred. I qualify for the years I've put in, but I figure I have at least another good five years, and we need the money. Do you have family?"

“No one close. I suppose you can say the police are my one big dysfunctional family. Unlike you, I went right to detective as a university graduate. Colin—Sergeant Camp—came up through the ranks from PC just like you. Between the two of us, we had a full appreciation of our fellows and the different layers of society that make up Birmingham’s conurbation. I’m hoping that will continue as the two of us work together. Welcome, Sergeant Clarkson.”

She frowned after digesting his little speech, but it was a fleeting one. “I’ve worked here before, helping on a few cases. It’s a solid substation, this one. I worked with Colin, in fact, when we were both DCs. He was a nice man, and we helped each other prepare for the exams.”

“I see. Well, go get yourself sorted with a desk and all that. Right now, we’re in a bit of a lull, and there are no pending cases. I suspect that will change at any moment, so don’t get too comfortable.”

He tried a smile again, hoping that would tell her he was trying for a bit of camaraderie. He really wasn’t. *This woman must prove herself if she thinks she’s going to replace Colin!*

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Brian had chastised himself a bit for leaving his new sergeant on her own, but her arrival had reminded him of how much he missed working with Colin. *Maybe I need another major case to distract me and take me out of my funk?* That would also allow him to get an idea about how Helen would be as his new partner.

It wasn’t that he minded working with a woman. He had done so before, with superiors when he was a DS and with his own team members as a DI. He believed they liked working with him a lot more than some of the gruff old misogynistic men in the force, some of them still believing that women shouldn’t be coppers. As long as a person did their job, a colleague’s sex, religious preferences, and social status were irrelevant in his mind’s eye, except for the inevitable interfering events of engagements, weddings, and funerals; christenings and other religious ceremonies; and sports and clubs—all of them things he tried to avoid as much as possible but knew others reveled in them.

He put Helen’s background information on the screen of his laptop, looking once again for clues about her strengths and weaknesses now that their partnership was a *fait accompli*. She had nothing obvious for the latter except that she was married with two children, something he assumed she’d learned to adequately manage as well as Colin had. Some of her strengths could be seen from the list of extra professional courses she’d taken just before and after her promotion to DS several years earlier: martial arts, computer technology, forensics science, psych profiling, and so forth. He’d loved those courses at the Peel Centre after college, although his undoubtedly had been more intense, but he knew that the practical knowledge she had gathered while on the beat as a PC would be worth a lot too.

*Is she working towards another promotion before retirement?* He hoped not. He’d been with Colin for almost ten years; now he had to work with someone entirely new. He would much prefer that Helen Clarkson would turn out to be a steady partner for a long while as well.

*But we need a case!*

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Brian sorted papers and filed them, answered some emails, and was just wondering if he should go see how his new sergeant was doing despite not wanting to bother her, when his desk phone rang. After the call, he took his mobile out of his suit coat, hung it on the coat rack, and slipped on an old raincoat he used for such occasions. He then found Clarkson’s mobile number on his call list.

“We have a case, Sergeant. Commandeer an EV from the carpool. I’ll meet you in front of the station.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

He found her in the car adjusting the driver’s seat. She was a big woman, and the new pool cars were a lot smaller—fine for him but a bit uncomfortable for her.

“Address?” she said.

He read it from the duty sergeant’s text message, she punched it into the car’s GPS, and they were off. The address was for a small mall not far from the station. The body was in a narrow alleyway behind an empty store, the row of similar stores a reflection of the bad economy that people said was nationwide.

Brian got out and approached the pathologist. “Dr. Hazelton, this nice lady is my new partner, Detective Sergeant Helen Clarkson. Helen, meet Mark Hazelton.”

The pathologist was Brian’s age, which meant he was also younger than Helen. He glanced at his gloved hands and decided to just wave a greeting. “Suit up, you two, if you want a look at the victim. I hope your breakfast was a while ago.”

After putting on the protective gear provided by a member of the doctor’s team—Brian’s slipped easily over the old raincoat, which is why he’d changed—they ducked their heads and entered the large tent.

“No ID yet,” Mark said.

They walked around the naked body—the tent kept gawking bystanders from seeing it—Brian saw there were no obvious wounds, but they could only see the bare back. From that perspective, she almost looked like the perfect companion for Michelangelo’s “David”—marble-like, almost translucent white skin, short-cropped and curly blond hair with shades of gold, and the classic female form could have made her that sculptor’s model to produce a suitable companion for the slayer of the giant.

Mark turned her over; Helen gasped and Brian gulped. Bloody red gashes disfigured that perfect torso, even though they couldn’t hide the classic beauty. Her breasts hadn’t been defiled and probably wouldn’t have had much need of a bra. Brian guessed she was late twenties or early thirties. Her eyes were blue and stared into infinity. Now his thoughts changed to Botticelli’s famous portrait of the birth of Venus, now reduced to a stillbirth. He controlled his fury, though. *We must find her killer!*

“No signs of rape?” Helen said as Mark covered the body.

*I should have asked that,* Brian thought. *Did I not because Helen is present, not Colin?* He would have to think about that.

“Nothing obvious, Sergeant. I’ll know more later.”

Helen knelt to examine the face better. Brian knew she was resisting the temptation to close the dead eyes. “Who did this to you, love? Someone has defiled your beautiful body out of rage.” She looked up at Mark. “Although I can no longer see the gashes, I’d say the weapon was more of a ripping knife, possibly serrated, than a slicer, don’t you think?”

“Not the scalpel of a plastic surgeon, to be honest. And he must have hit bones a few times. That might give us a better idea about the kind of weapon.”

“I don’t suppose you have TOD yet?” Brian said.

“Sometime last night she was dumped here. I say ‘dumped’ because there’d be a lot more blood otherwise. They have a sweeper that goes through here every evening after the mall closes, which is nine-thirty during the week. I’ll have a better estimate of TOD after the body’s on my exam table.”

“Tomorrow at ten okay for our visit?”

“Probably.”

“Good, good. Maybe by then we’ll have an ID. Thank you, Mark.”

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“That was awful,” Helen said to Brian during the return trip to the station.

“Indeed. We owe it to that poor woman and her family to find her killer. I’ll leave it to you to get the team sorted and the crime board set up in the incident room. The former will require a few calls because I gave everyone some time off after the last case. They deserved it.”

“Okay, boss. Will you meet with the media?”

“We’ll see what the DCI says. I need to talk to him about borrowing a few extra PCs and DCs to help with interviews at the mall and wherever the victim lived. He’s always worried about overtime and unbudgeted expenses. I guess that’s his job. I’m happy that it’s his, not mine. And, by the way, forget the ‘boss.’ It sounds so damn corporate. I’m Brian; you’re Helen. At least here among us. That goes for the whole team, of course. No excess formality.”

She glanced at his vest and suit pants and remembered the matching coat—off-the-rack but all stylish. Smiling, she thought, *Mr. Three-Piece-Suit wants informality? He dresses better than the DCI.* But she’d lose that raincoat that makes him look like a Cockney Columbo.

Two hours later, she appeared in his office. “We’ve got an ID.” Brian indicated a chair and she sat. “Prints and DNA were on record, although we only had the short genealogical website’s version of the latter from the pathologist’s office to compare with so far. She’d been arrested previously. Her name’s Jennifer Kilborn. She started a pub row with another woman when that woman accused her of trying to seduce her date.”

“Um, that’s a new one for me. Usually goes the other way, with the brawl fueled by male testosterone. Did she do time?”

“Remanded to her husband and on probation for six months because of no prior form. That was six years ago. No further arrests.”

“I guess she learned her lesson. I doubt her demise relates to that old arrest. Does she still live with her husband?”

Helen shrugged. “As far as we know. There’s no evidence of domestic problems. Maybe she was just bored. It was mostly the word of one woman against the other, although the publican backed the other woman’s story, saying Jennifer was the instigator. Some women are very possessive of their men. A hen can’t even bat her eyelashes at a handsome rooster without the bloke’s wife getting jealous.” Helen smiled. “Liquor’s often a good substitute for the testosterone and augments the passiveness. I guess the judge believed Mrs. Kilborn’s accuser and the publican more. Jennifer never pled guilty, though.”

“Was she with her own husband? Maybe the accuser started it with him.”

“No, so, like I said, maybe she was just bored. The husband was traveling for business.”

Brian nodded. “Okay. Get their address. We’ll pay the husband a visit. Unless he already knows, we’ll have to tell him his wife’s been murdered. That’s never pleasant.”

“No, although, between that and an autopsy, I don’t know which is worse.”

“We’ll be doing that as well. Later. I hope you don’t mind.”

“It always helps me.” He looked surprised. “Motivates me to go out and get some justice for the victim.”

He nodded again. Helen knew why this time. *Despite their obvious differences, she decided that she and her new boss often thought alike about their jobs.*

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There was no one home at the Kilborn house, a modest three-bedroom-plus-den structure a bit farther out in the London suburbs. After a dozen rings of the bell, Brian said, "Let's walk around the house to see what we can see."

All the curtains and blinds were open, but from the front they'd only seen an orderly sitting room. From the back they now saw into the kitchen, den, and corner bedroom with attached bathroom. The latter two were a mess, but that didn't mean anything in particular. They presumed there was another bath and two bedrooms upstairs.

Out in front again, Brian said, "Considering the husband's always the major suspect when a wife is killed, I think we need a warrant to enter and see if there's any sign Jennifer Kilborn was murdered here. What do we know about the husband, other than he travels a lot?"

"He buys and sells artifacts and artwork to private collectors as well as antique stores and the like."

"Um, find any Elizabethan house and you'll find plenty of those. Not this house, obviously."

"I think the artifacts he deals in are older than that. Celtic helmets and Roman swords from Britain; goblets and such from the continent; even artwork like paintings and sculptures. A lot of toffs like to flaunt their wealth, Brian."

"To be honest, I prefer to visit a museum, private or public. We have some lovely castles in the UK as well. Ireland too. I don't have room for antiquities at my place."

She laughed. "We don't either, even if we could afford them. The commissions Mr. Kilborn makes could probably buy our groceries for a year. Does our DCI have any leverage with a friendly judge?"

"Yes, he does. Let me call him." After a short discussion on his mobile, Brian said, "We can either wait here or have some lunch. I'll get an e-copy of the warrant on my phone soon enough, which should be good enough, but that might take a while. We'll get some lunch. I'm buying."

"Let's do separate bills," Helen said. "Keeps the expenses straight."

He shrugged. "I was only trying to help out with the groceries," he said with a smile.

They found a pub that served lunch, had a meat pie, and washed it all down with a glass of ale. The topic of conversation was the woman's murder, of course.

Alvin Kilborn, as husband of the victim, would be a prime suspect. They'd have to talk with him when he returned from his trip. But meanwhile they could investigate some things along these lines: He asked Helen to call Jennifer's lawyer and find out who benefitted from her will if she had one. She'd done so while they'd waited for their food. As usual in these cases, the husband inherited the couple's estate. Oscar Prieto, the victim's lawyer, hastened to say that Alvin's will was written in the same way. There was nothing to indicate that the will could be a motive for murder.

"I saw that you facetimes," Brian said after she'd hung up.

"I find it helps to see some of the body language at least. I don't know if you could see him well, but Prieto's a cute Latin type."

"Sounded like he was almost chatting you up."

"Also typically Latin. But no, I was brought back by reality. Did you hear him say that I reminded him of his mum?"

Brian laughed. "Too busy on the pie. I'm guessing your charm was lost on him."

Helen smiled. "Thanks for saying that."

But his thoughts had already turned beyond pie and flirting to elsewhere. “Murders without motives are unusual events. Especially planned ones. I think this one must be associated with Alvin’s work in some way. Maybe something related to his travels?”

“Are you thinking something dodgy overseas occurred? Like dealing with tomb raiders or something?”

“That sounds like some books I’ve read.”

“Or movies I’ve seen. But things like that can occur in real life.”

“Indeed they do, so let’s keep an open mind about all the possibilities. And that one might mean Alvin Kilborn is in danger as well. We should put surveillance on him when he returns.”

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The warrant came through when they were having coffee.

At the house, Brian tried Mr. Kilborn’s number again and rang the bell many times, before saying, “I’m loathe to break a door down even with the warrant. I wonder if this is a rental and there’s an estate agent.”

*Now you think of that*, Helen mused. *Is my new boss not so practical after all?* Of course, she hadn’t thought of it either, but she wasn’t the SIO. “Let’s see if there’s an unlocked window or door before we take any hasty actions. I don’t like breaking and entering either.”

A den window was unlatched. Once inside, they soon found out why. Besides the books and papers strewn about the room, there was the smell of disinfectant. Brian sniffed and followed the odor up to the far wall that divided the den from the bedroom. He knelt to study the floorboards and molding trimming that wall-to-floor union.

“Time to call the SOCOs, Helen. I believe there was blood spatter here and someone tried to clean it up. Maybe our missing husband? He could have returned early. It will light up when they put the luminol on it.”

This time they didn’t visit a pub to wait. In the police EV, Brian offered to put some music on. He chose a classical music FM station. By the time the SOCOs arrived, Helen was sick of Bela Bartok’s music that reminded her too much of some atonal stuff that one of her younger brothers favored.

The SOCOs confirmed Brian’s guess. “We’ll have to go through the whole house, Inspector,” the SOCOs’ leader said, “so we’ll take a while.”

“The spatter might be confined to the den, but if you find anything else, let us know.” He joined Helen outside. “Did you get the BOLF out for the husband?”

“Yes. We might be solving this case sooner than later.”

“We now know that the den probably was the primary murder scene. If the husband is indeed traveling, he might have an excellent alibi. We then move on to their families and friends first. The fact she was killed in their home does suggest she knew her assailant.”

Helen nodded. Both heard the steps on the walkway and turned to meet the PC who was approaching them, one of three assigned to crowd control. All the activity had drawn in gawking neighbors.

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The PC barely acknowledged Helen’s presence. “Guv, do you have a moment?”

Brian looked at the PC who’d dared to interrupt them and read his name tag: Peter Wilson.

“Every moment of mine counts, Constable Wilson, Sergeant Clarkson’s too, so your stealing one had better be important for this investigation.”

The PC stood his ground. "A Mr. Alvin Kilborn has arrived. He claims we've invaded his home."

Brian glanced at the irate man standing behind the police tape and then at Helen. She shrugged. *A relative? Certainly not the husband? Isn't he traveling?* "Okay. I'll talk to him. Lead the way."

"What exactly is your business here?" Brian demanded of the man who was taller and more muscular than the inspector, but Brian didn't back away as he confronted the angry giant.

"I'll ask you the same thing and expect your answer first. This is my house!"

Brian nodded. *He is the husband.* "We have a warrant to search this residence for evidence, sir, no matter what your business here might be. And now we've declared this house to be a crime scene."

"You-you've what?"

"We're in the middle of an investigation, sir, one involving a Mrs. Jennifer Kilborn. Are you a relative who lives here?"

He sputtered. "Are you daft, you pompous prat? I own this house. I'm Jenny's husband! Where is she?"

"I see. I lament to inform you that she's in the morgue. We'll be keeping her body for a while, I'm afraid. But please settle down. I can see that your pulse is racing and your blood pressure is high. Let's have a little chinwag in that patrol car."

"What? I can't go inside my own house? I have all my luggage sitting there by my car...and I couldn't even park in my own drive!"

"No entry now. I'm sorry. Our forensics team is busy in there. Maybe eventually, later today, perhaps. Please follow me."

Brian took the driver's seat, reaching over to turn off the blue lights; Alvin Kilborn sat in the passenger's, looking sullen.

"I understand you were overseas, possibly on the continent?"

"Paris. I had business to attend to there. What the hell happened here?"

"I can't tell you any more than I have already. Your wife's body was dumped elsewhere. Apparently, she was murdered here. I can't provide any more details until we eliminate you as a suspect, sir. Bear with me." The reddening of the man's face told Brian that Kilborn wasn't liking what he'd heard. *Too bad! The husband is always the principal suspect.* "What is your business, sir. Why do you need to travel?" Of course, he already knew the answer, but Brian wanted to see how much the man acknowledged.

"I buy and sell artwork and antiques. It requires travel throughout Europe. I make purchases on commission if needs be or become an intermediary between some dealer who has an order here and my contacts over there. It's complicated."

"I see. I'd ask you to help us then if you'd be so kind. Could you write up the details of your travels with dates and times and send them to my partner, Detective Sergeant Helen Clarkson? That will help us exclude you as a suspect as well as allow us to determine when your wife was here alone. Please be complete in your listing."

At that moment, Helen approached accompanied by the lead SOCO. "Mr. Grisby would like a word with you, Inspector," she said.

"You're free to go now, Mr. Kilborn. We'll keep you informed of the progress of our investigation." Brian exited the patrol car. He didn't know Grisby well—the station contracted many of its SOCOs—but the inspector wasn't about to discuss matters with Alvin Kilborn present. "Stay with Mr. Kilborn until he leaves, Sergeant. Let's get some privacy, Arnold."

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The SOCO followed Brian halfway around to the side of the house. "You've found something else?"

"Amidst the mess in the den, there were two used glasses that were probably on the desk but ended up on the floor. One has the wife's prints. Considering the desk phone and a few other things where there are two sets of prints, it's likely the other was used by the husband."

"A farewell and good-luck toast before his trip? So what?"

"I'd say they were knocked off the desk onto the floor during a skirmish."

"Um, bit of a stretch, I dare say. Wouldn't you agree? And that might just prove that they were sitting there all the time he was gone until the altercation occurred. When did that occur, by the way? Any idea?"

"Most likely last night. Besides the blood spatter that lit up, there was some blood in the cracks of the floor. Some of it was still tacky."

"Good man. And give my thanks to your team." Brian thought a moment. "That would fit onto our timeline quite well then. Someone killed her, cleaned up as best they could, and dropped her in that alley."

"Look, sir, I'm not trying to run your investigation for you, but I'm suggesting you make sure that Kilborn didn't arrive back here yesterday or earlier."

Brian nodded. "I have him making us a list of his travels. It will be easy to confirm everything that he lists." He paused a moment more in thought. "With the remainder of the house so tidy, though, you'd think that Jennifer would have washed those glasses if they corresponded to bon-voyage wishes. Food for thought, Arnold, but our problem, not yours."

"Yes sir."

Brian rejoined Helen and Kilborn in the patrol car, who had stayed to verbally abuse the sergeant instead of leaving.

"Mr. Kilborn, did you and your wife share a toast to wish success for your trip to the continent just before you departed?"

He shrugged. "I don't remember. Sometimes we did, though. I always hated to leave her alone."

"Indeed. And exactly when was it that you departed?"

"It'll be on your damn list, but it was five days ago."

"And the day you arrived back?"

"Just now. Today. My vehicle was at the airport's long-term car park, so I just came right here."

"I see. That's a bit of a drive. Okay. No more questions for now. Please deliver your complete list. Also, please don't leave the area. We might need to question you some more."

"But where will I stay? That's why I didn't leave before when you said I could!"

"I dare say you should be able to find a local hotel. You must be experienced at doing just that, considering all your travels."

"Not around here."

"Then I suggest you use your mobile to find a hotel." Brian handed Alvin his card. "Please let us know where you'll be lodged. And please call me if you can think of anything that might aid us in our investigation."

Kilborn shook his head in frustration, got out of the patrol car, and returned to his own vehicle, where he put his suitcases back into the boot. As he drove off, Helen said, "He's nervous, furious, and lying about something."

“I got that too. But it could be about anything and not particularly connected to his wife’s murder: a mistress in Europe—although how any mistress could compete with such a beautiful wife is hard to fathom; some dodgy business dealings; a secret life as an MI6 agent—”

“Where did that come from?” Helen said with a laugh.

He shrugged. “I read a lot of spy-fi.” He considered their investigation a bit more professionally. “I think we should have a few PCs or DCs keep track of Alvin Kilborn’s activities for a time. I don’t trust him.”

“That’s probably prudent.”

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They barely had time to sort the team into new assignments given the new information when Brian was called to the DCI’s office.

“Sit down, Fitz. Bring me up to date.”

Brian, whose tidy mind had always automatically ordered facts, theories, and wild guesses as they became available, launched into an excellent summary of the status of the investigation.

“I’ll make just one comment,” the DCI said. “Exclude Alvin Kilborn as quickly as possible from your suspect list. He’s made a few special purchases for the Chief Superintendent and Lord Mayor, so he’s probably beyond reproach.”

“I’m sorry, but the husband is always the first suspect, sir. But I did want to exclude him as soon as possible unless there are more questions he needs to answer down the road. Would it be impertinent for me to ask if Mr. and Mrs. Kilborn socialized with the Superintendent and Mayor and their wives?”

“In other words, you want to know if the Kilborns socialized with our local upper crust?”

“His business suggests that he might. Most people don’t have the means to dabble in artworks and antiquities. If ‘upper crust’ means ‘rich elites,’ they would be his logical clients, I dare say.”

The DCI nodded. “He might be one himself. Or his wife. In any case, they’re respected members of our community, and Alvin Kilborn provides a useful service for those willing to invest in that sort of thing.”

“Is that what it’s considered?”

“An investment? I suppose. A considerable one, it would seem.”

“And not a love for artworks and antiquities per se?”

The DCI smiled. “How would I know? I can’t afford any of that.”

“Nor I. Nor would I want to invest in it.” Brian uncrossed his legs. “I’ll keep you informed, sir. Mr. Kilborn is providing a list of his recent travels away from home. We should be able to exclude him soon.”

“The murderer might be some random pervert who became obsessed with Jennifer Kilborn.”

“A bit too organized to be random. Or a very long obsession. We might have to go all the way back to university days. For our victim and her husband. And the fact that all the action at the house was confined to the den indicates something important.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“She knew her assailant and let him in.”

The DCI nodded. “Yes, I can see that. She knew her killer before she was killed.” The DCI spread his hands on the desk palms on. “Well, carry on, Inspector. And keep me informed.”

When Brian returned to the incident room, it was nearly empty except for Helen. “Did you get everyone sorted?”

“Yes. I told them to get started and that they could continue after our briefing tomorrow morning. Or make necessary adjustments considering what they discover. I’ve been trying to delve into Mr. and Mrs. Kilborn’s backgrounds. Hers is better known than his. She was a music and political science student at Oxford. He graduated in mechanical engineering with a degree from Birmingham University. Both educated, although you’d think their roles would be reversed.”

“Maybe she was a silent partner who took care of the art aspects of his business, and he was more into checking provenance and so forth?”

“Besides playing in a local string quartet—she was a cellist—she wasn’t gainfully employed. You could be right. Some of the artifacts Alvin sold were ancient instruments. No Strads or anything like that, but authentic period pieces, it seems.”

“Yes, perhaps they were a team.” He thought a moment and then frowned. “That might imply that Alvin Kilborn is also in danger. Make sure whoever is tracking him knows about that possibility.”

“Will do.”

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At the next briefing the following morning, several of the team reported on what they’d discovered, some of which was news to Helen and Brian but still unwelcome: They’d delved into Alvin Kilborn’s travelogue, and all items so far were confirmed; their prime suspect couldn’t have participated directly in Jennifer Kilborn’s murder.

“He could still have hired someone to do it,” a DC suggested.

“And he had the wherewithal to do that,” said another. “His business is doing quite well.”

Brian uncrossed his legs, smiled, and held up a hand. “A few steps forward, ladies and gentlemen, and a few steps back. If our jobs were easy, anyone could do them. They’re not easy, but we’re trained investigators. Let’s keep at it. Anything more on forensics?” This was directed at Arnold, the SOCOs team leader, who was attending even though it wasn’t required of civilian employees.

“We found a bloody nightshirt stuffed in the backyard incinerator,” Arnold said. “The blood matches that of the house, indicating that Jennifer might have been asleep when the murderer arrived. There are two sets of prints in the study not yet identified. Not in HOLMES, in any case. We’re looking into Europol and Interpol, transit, and other databases.”

Brian nodded. “Add DGSI, the *Garda*, and other European agencies to your list. Alvin Kilborn travels so much, who knows where he found a hit man, if there is one. If you get any hits—pardon that terrible pun—let us know. Otherwise, the rest of us must follow up on all of Jennifer and Alvin’s contacts—family, friends, and even casual acquaintances. Someone knows something that’s useful to our investigation. Okay, let’s get to it.”

Helen approached Brian after the others trickled out of the incident room. “A setback on the traveling itinerary, isn’t it? I still see the bloke as a bit dodgy.”

Brian smiled. “His shiftiness might be just due to some questionable business dealings and nothing to do with the murder.”

“Or a mistress in Paris or some other European capital, as you suggested?”

“We can handle that question easily enough. I’ve worked with some of our European counterparts and can call in some favors. Unofficially, of course, but a lead is a lead. We’ll keep

track of Arnold's two mysterious prints as well. I neglected to ask where the SOCOs found them."

"I'll do that."

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Talking to Helen, it had occurred to Brian that one reason for Jennifer's killer to search the den was to look for some artifact that Alvin had purchased on some previous trip and liked well enough to keep...or he gave it to his wife. *Perhaps she surprised her assailant or assailants mid-search?* When he learned from Arnold that the prints were on the shelf next to each other and above a lower cabinet, it made sense to him that the cabinet had been searched and the shelf above was used to steady a kneeling person.

*What could Jennifer's assailant have been looking for?* Brian called Alvin. After fielding the man's questions as obtusely as possible, he said, "Do you have an inventory of *objets d'art* you've brought into the country?"

"Of course. Their provenance and the commercial enterprise or private customer where they ended up, including the price I paid and the price I received for my troubles. I'm very leery of a tax audit, Inspector Fitzsimmons. I have a reputation to maintain."

"You resell everything you bring into the UK?"

"Most everything. I keep a few things either Jennifer or I fancy for the house, but not many and not of any value either."

"I'll modify my request then: Could you provide a list of items you kept for your personal use first?"

"I suppose. I need to be there in my den to do that. That's where the records are, in the filing cabinets."

"I see. Can we meet at your house then? Just for that?"

"Where are you going with this?"

"Perhaps nowhere, but it's something we need to check. I prefer not to show my cards until it's time to do that, you see."

"No, I don't see. Have you confirmed all my travels yet?"

"Almost done, sir. So far, I'd say you'd have to have been in two places at once, so your alibi is looking solid."

"Of course it's solid. I wasn't in the UK!"

"You could have hired a proxy, Mr. Kilborn. Checking for that requires a bit more patience on your part."

"What? Are you accusing me of hiring someone to kill my wife? How dare you!"

"It's my business to dare, Mr. Kilborn. I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm only saying that confirming you were out of the country isn't as solid an alibi as you might think. We must check all possibilities. Please realize that. You do want us to find your wife's killer, correct?"

"Well, it's not me! Damn it, just find out who it is!"

"I'll meet you at the house, Mr. Kilborn. I'll have to accompany you inside and look over your shoulder, I'm afraid. I can't see any other way to do this."

"You could send your nice sergeant instead."

"Indeed, but my nice sergeant is busy with other aspects of the investigation. I'm the one pursuing this particular thread. Drive carefully, sir."

Brian let Helen know where he was going, though.

"I hope you'll not be wasting your time."

"They must have been looking for something."

“Probably Alvin Kilborn’s single malt. He looks the type.”

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Brian looked over Alvin’s list of artifacts they’d kept for their house. “Just five?”

“They have more aesthetic value than monetary value, you’ll note.”

“I’ve found that one man might place a lot of value on an artwork; yet another might call it trash. These are either Greek or Roman vases. Where are they?”

“I’ll have to go to other rooms to get them, Inspector.”

“Lead the way, sir.”

The five vases were dispersed throughout the house. They returned to the den aka study and placed them on the desk. They were indeed beautiful—small but attractive antiquities made by ancient artisans. Brian saw nothing about them that might shed light on their investigation.

“I believe they were looking for something more specific,” he said, approaching the bookcase-and-cabinet combination lining one wall. “See here? The smudges? We have these prints on file but have no idea whose they are.”

“They might have been looking within the cabinets.” Alvin thought a moment. “I sometimes guard a few smaller objects here, ones I’m going to personally deliver to clients.”

“Does anyone else know that?”

“Besides Jennifer?” Brian nodded. “I doubt it. Let me get started on your other list. I can flag those that I might have kept in there for a time. Will that be of any help?”

“Maybe. If we can discern a meaning. Their provenance might tell us something.”

Brian spent time on his mobile reading various reports from his team while Alvin toiled on his list. Finally, he approached Brian.

“I’ve put them in descending order of date. There aren’t many.”

Brian examined the list. “These three from Syria caught my attention. Isn’t that ranging a bit far afield even for you, not to mention the danger?”

Alvin smiled. “I picked up those three pieces in Prague. They came from Syria via Istanbul. They’re Phoenician, according to the experts. I sold them to a museum in Edinburgh. A fellow named MacGregor is creating a Middle Eastern wing there. I hope he already had some bigger pieces for it. Those three would hardly fill a table.”

“How did he find out about his interest?”

“The usual way: I send out an email newsletter every month. Private and public collectors are among its subscribers.”

“And you kept those pieces here?”

“Correct.”

“Why would a thief be looking to steal them?”

“Because he read a copy of the newsletter and fancied them? Who knows? They’re in Edinburgh now, as far as I know.”

“Who was the previous owner in Prague?”

“Let me look. That’s in the same file. I just didn’t write it down. Ah, here it is: The name of the owner in Prague was Yuri Rostov.”

“Sounds Russian.”

“I only talked to him on the phone. Had a heavy accent. His aide gave me the artifacts. I believe Rostov is Russian, though. From there originally. An oligarch exiled by Mr. Putin, to be precise.”

“Maybe he wanted those artifacts back for some reason.”



"I can't imagine why. And why would he come here? He knew they would end up in Edinburgh."

"Did you have them authenticated?"

"Right there in Prague in Rostov's home, no less. A bloke from the university there examined them."

"Do you know if your buyer in Edinburgh authenticated them as well?"

"He'd have been stupid not to do so. Especially because I hadn't done business with him before."

"Let's call him and see."

"Are you kidding? You're like a dog chasing his tail, you know."

"Humor me. There's nothing else in that cabinet beyond empty shelves and a few board games. I doubt the thief was looking to steal an old Monopoly set."

"Okay, I see your point. But I think you're wasting your time. Mine too, to put a fine point on it."

"Something occurred here that made someone silence your wife forever, Mr. Kilborn. I don't have to have a motivation for a killing, but one can often help me find the killer. You say you didn't kill your wife by proxy. That's entirely possible, but you should want to discover who did. In particular, you yourself might be in danger."

Kilborn blanched. "Um, there's that. Okay, I'll call the bloke in Edinburgh, and we can go on speakerphone."

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There was something odd about Kilborn's story, a niggle Brian would sometimes get that people were hiding some key piece of information. That feeling continued as Kilborn contacted Ewan MacGregor. After explaining who he was and what had happened to Kilborn's wife, Brian asked about the Syrian artifacts.

"We haven't got that new wing's exhibit quite ready yet, Inspector. Turkey has insisted some other items must be declared to be 'on loan' to preserve the country's heritage, which practically means that they can recover them anytime if they feel like it. That's not that uncommon, but the bureaucracy, mostly on their end, is maddening. I'm afraid Alvin's three items are still in their shipping boxes. I opened them a while ago just to see that they were intact and we received what we agreed upon, but I resealed the boxes. I'm looking at the cartons now; they're in my office's corner taking up space I'd like to have back."

"Did you take a good look at the objects? See anything inside them? Drugs or anything like that?"

"Nothing inside that I remember. Look, I can't imagine how Jennifer's killer would be interested in those three artifacts, only an erudite fella like me."

"Could you examine them again? At your convenience, of course. The woman's killer found them interesting for some reason. I can't imagine him looking for anything else."

"Okay. I'll check again before I call it a day and go home. I suppose you can't overlook any possibility in an investigation like yours."

"Any clue can be important, yes sir."

"If I find anything at all, I'll call. Don't get your hopes up, though."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

"You're welcome. Sorry for your loss, Alvin."

Alvin mumbled something civilized and then disconnected. "I think I'd prefer to be left alone now, Inspector."

“Understood, but not here. Return to your hotel. This is still a crime scene. Just one more question: Did you spend some time in Edinburgh with Ewan MacGregor?”

Alvin laughed. “He’s quite a gregarious old Scot. We went to a tavern to celebrate. More my celebration than his, though, because I’d put one over on the Russians, Rostov in particular, a daringly bold adventure on my part, I guess. Anything they touch these days is a bit questionable, even though he’s fallen out of favor in Moscow.”

“I’d be a bit leery about something coming out of Syria as well, but neither Russia nor Syria are my problems. If those three artifacts turn out to be a red herring, something here in this house was still sought by your wife’s killer. Knowing what that is could be a key clue.”

Brian had settled in for a night of reading and listening to music. He was on the third novel of a series about some art detective, although this one reminded him of Christie’s *Death on the Nile* or *Murder on the Orient Express* because almost all of it took place on a riverboat tour of the Danube from Vilshofen to Budapest; Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition* as orchestrated by Ravel was playing on his stereo; and both seemed to mesh well with the events of his investigation, keeping his mind more or less focused on it. The call from Ewan MacGregor interrupted that relaxing mood that often led to insights about a case.

“I assume you discovered something about those artifacts?” he said after some civilized pleasantries. Brian liked learned people, and Ewan certainly qualified.

“One artifact. As you suggested, I did a more thorough examination. Good thing, too. It was so well done no one caught it before when determining authenticity.”

“So, it’s not authentic?”

“Oh yes, quite authentic, but there’s a modern addition to that one. A false bottom. It must have been folded up and then expanded once inside. Fits nice and snug.”

“I suppose you found drugs underneath?”

“No, Inspector, I found three thin sheets of paper. Because I know the Cyrillic alphabet, I could read what’s on them. It’s a list of names and addresses here in the UK, including Northern Ireland, and a lot of names are the opposite of what we do: They’ve taken the UK name and written it in Cyrillic, which isn’t hard to do, because Russian is basically phonetic. I’m sending you a text message with a copy of the three pages attached.”

“Is there any logo or seal on the sheets?”

“To ID who generated the list? No. But one name in the list is Yuri Rostov’s. Maybe it’s a list of members of a group working against Russia? Could have been generated by the same group in that case, or some pro-Russian operative.”

“Because Rostov’s no longer a favorite in Moscow? Yes, I suppose that could be a reason for the secrecy.” Brian thought a moment. “Those on that list could be just the opposite of what you’re thinking as well.”

“Russian agents, you mean? People working for Russia? In either case, I want nothing to do with anyone on that list. I’m just a museum curator, Inspector. I don’t do cloak-and-dagger stuff.”

“Neither do we. But I do want to arrest Jennifer Kilborn’s murderer, whoever he is. And I do know someone who does cloak-and-dagger policework. Once you send me the copy of those pages, put the originals in a safe or something and forget about them for now. I’ll get back to you eventually. Thank you for your help, Ewan.”

“Do you think Alvin is involved?”

“No. I think both Alvin and Jennifer Kilborn unfortunately represent collateral damage.”

After saying his goodbyes, Brian rang Helen. “We’ll be going to talk to a super-copper tomorrow morning. My place is on the way. Pick me up.”

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Brian wanted Helen to accompany him because she’d done a secondment with NCA. Created in 2013 as a UK-wide agency to go after organized crime, it would get involved in some cases when it was clear that solving them would be important for the entire nation. To many, that reorganization had been long overdue, and it meant that MI5 + NCA was like the US’s FBI.

As he waited for her, he went over what he’d learned. In particular, he wondered what the connection with Syria could be, if any. Of course, Kilborn hadn’t brought it from there, so the vase could have been rigged with a false bottom anywhere between Syria and Rostov. Were the sheets intended for Rostov and he just missed them? The answer to that question wasn’t as important as discovering the background for the people on the list and what they had in common. The mix of nationalities might be key in determining that. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble, so the list had to mean something.

“Have an address?” Helen said after he slid into the passenger’s seat. He told her. “That’s the Birmingham office of the NCA.”

“So, you’ll feel right at home.”

“Or not. They were still going through birth pains when I had my secondment. I can’t imagine it getting any better, but I’ll try to keep an open mind.”

“Do that. I think they might help us find Jennifer Kilborn’s murderer.”

“By taking over our entire case?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let them do that.”

Brian didn’t particularly like Agent Carter Lawson, the bloke he knew at NCA, but he thought he might be competent. After the brief ritual of greetings, Carter gestured towards the two guest chairs, and they all sat down. Carter focused on Brian. The Inspector could tell the agent didn’t like Helen, so that added a few more negatives to Brian’s list about Carter. The man had shaken her hand but then ignored her. *How will she react to that?*

Carter read through the list, swiveled in his chair, and consulted some computer database. “Interesting, old man.”

“Why?” Brian said.

“Some of the names—um, hold on a second.” He punched a button on his old intercom. “Gladys, I need two NDA forms.” He winked at Brian. “Sorry. Official Secrets and all that. The security level of this conversation has just increased.”

“Why? Because those names are known to NCA? Come on, Carter. Information is supposed to flow both ways.”

Carter shrugged. “There are protocols to follow.” Carter took an ink pad and stamp from a desk drawer and stamped each page of the document.

“I suppose that means that NCA thinks it now has ownership?” Helen said. “That’s a bit naïve on your part, Agent Lawson. We have our own copies, you know.”

“That’s one thing the NDA form will cover.”

Helen winked at Brian. “That’s ‘non-disclosure agreement,’ boss. We must refuse to sign them. I won’t sign mine.”

Brian nodded and stood. She followed his lead. “Have a good day, Carter. Or, even better, a bad one.”

They walked out.

“Wait!” Carter had followed them into the corridor. “You can’t walk out of here!”

“Are you kidnapping us, Agent Lawson?” Helen said. “Two police officers? That will generate some media coverage, I’m sure. I can see the story now in *The Guardian* and a few other papers.”

Brian smiled. He’d been right about bringing her along. He didn’t quite know what she’d feel about that, but she provided some necessary leverage. “Looks like my sergeant knows how to handle NCA bureaucracy. Check, Carter, and maybe checkmate? We’ll dictate the terms of this collaboration, not the NCA.”

“As far as I know, you generated that list out of thin air.”

“If you truly believe that, why all the hassle with the NDA forms?”

“I need to know your source.”

“Want to sign an NDA form?”

Carter smiled. “Okay. Point taken. I’ll let your sergeant read what’s on my screen. At least she still has an active clearance.”

“Not acceptable,” Helen said. “The Inspector needs to see it too.”

“Oh, fuck it to hell! Be my guests. It’s still up. I’ll go get some coffees for us.” When he returned with three mugs and some packets of creamer and sugar, he placed them on his desk. “Learn anything?”

“That even the Russian names on the list correspond to organized crime figures,” Helen said. “It’s time to talk specifics.”

“Then it’s time for the NDAs,” Carter said.

“Agreed,” Brian said. “Three of them. If we’re going to divulge the origin of the list, you as NCA rep mustn’t disclose it.”

“Oh hell! Okay. I’ll have Gladys make an NDA modelled after ours.”

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The three became an unusual team. As the days passed, they learned about the plans to create a collaborating network of organized crime syndicates. There’d always been implicit agreements—each criminal organization had informal agreements with others in the same area about which patch and which activity belonged to whom. But these plans formalized that process.

“It’s like a NATO of crime syndicates,” Carter said in one meeting. “Any attack on one is an attack on all. We’ve got to find out how far these plans have gone.”

“We, meaning Helen and I, have only to find out who made that list and who was willing to kill to get it. NCA can have the bigger pie, Carter.”

“NCA has it by law, but I’m not sure even we can handle it. Our lack of personnel stands in the way.”

“I had a secondment as part of a solution to that problem,” Helen said. “Any reason why the Home Office can’t do that nationally?”

“Like create a special task force with police departments from across the UK contributing?” Brian suggested. “That would have to come from the Home Office, or it would go nowhere.”

And he was right. The VIPs soon created and took over the task force. Carter Lawton was swallowed up in its maws, and Helen and Brian returned to trying to find Jennifer Kilborn’s murderer, now with a much larger list of suspects.

They went through them one by one, knowing that the crime syndicates leaders wouldn’t have committed the actual crime. All they could do was focus on their local area and then move outwards, ever widening the circle.

A week later Brian was called in to talk to the DCI. He'd been in the briefing that morning.

"I'll give you two more days, Brian, and then the Kilborn murder becomes a cold case. This whole thing has become a slog through reeking fells if you ask me."

Brian shrugged. "The NCA's involvement hasn't helped all that much, but that at least told us who's who on that list. Helen wants to keep going, but I'm inclined to agree with you. The obvious suspects are cleared."

"And any syndicate in that list wouldn't want it to become known to the police."

"If Jennifer hadn't been home—" Brian stopped in midsentence. "Maybe she wasn't originally!" Brian jumped up and dashed out of the office.

He found Helen at her desk in the open-plan area of the CID. "How was our victim dressed?"

Helen looked surprised. "Who? Jennifer Kilborn?" Brian nodded. "She was found naked in the alley, Brian."

"Yes, but how was she dressed at the house?"

"We don't know."

"We were supposed to think that she'd been sleeping when the killer surprised her. That bloody nightshirt indicated that. But the killing took place in the study, not her bedroom."

"I suppose the killer could have taken her to the study. Maybe she thought those three relics were still there if she even knew about them. When they weren't, he killed her to eliminate a witness."

"And then hauled her body all the way downtown?"

"He arranged things to make it hard to ID her."

"True. But there was no evidence for forced entry, was there?"

"Maybe the killer had a key?"

"Or she knew him? We've focused on Alvin as a suspect. Have we ever paid any attention to Jennifer? During Alvin's many travels, perhaps she met someone."

"A philandering wife and not a philandering husband?"

"Not necessarily. A good friend who just happened to have connections with a local mob. How many are on that list?"

"Let me see." Helen went into some database Brian didn't know about. It looked to be a lot more organized than HOLMES. "This is the one in central Birmingham on MacGregor's list, the Silver Gang. Andy and Nate Silver, father and son, are its leaders. And this is curious: Nate Silver's legal team and the Kilborns' are one and the same. Different briefs, same law office."

"Do Jennifer and Alvin have the same lawyer?"

"No. Is that important?"

"Let's go visit Jennifer's. I think we talked to him about her will. Oscar something."

Helen nodded. "Oscar Prieto. That was a wasted exercise. Alvin inherited everything. And his will was written in the same way. That's common among married couples."

Brian thought a moment.

"I'm getting to know that look," Helen said. "You're thinking Oscar was more than just Jennifer's lawyer?"

"I wouldn't begin to suspect him if it weren't for the the connection of the firm with the Silver Gang."

"Um, sometimes it's just about asking the right questions."

"I hope that that's true in this case."

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“How could we have missed that?” Helen said as she stopped the video tape.

It was the night of the murder. Jennifer Kilborn had just met Oscar Prieto in the car park of a pub not far from the Kilborn’s house. The two had a passionate embrace and went inside.

“Major *faux pas* on my part,” Brian said. “One is thinking: Poor woman. She’s a victim. While it’s the case that’s a tragedy—no one deserves to die like that—it leads one to overlook the possibility that the victim might have been somewhat responsible for what happened.”

“Or Prieto just seduced her so he could find the list. He’s quite the flamboyant Latin type. Alvin can’t compete, and Jennifer might have been flattered.”

“Hold that thought. Prieto served in the army. You know what that means.”

“We can get his DNA. That would place him at the scene of the crime if there’s a match.”

“She invited him in, went up to change, and returned to the study for a nightcap. Hence the two glasses. Prieto thought of almost everything, but he’s still an amateur.”

“Maybe wanting to make points with Nate Silver by finding the list?”

“Should we tell NCA?”

“No. We should arrest Oscar Prieto and interrogate him. I’m sure we have our killer. All that time with the NCA was wasted. We didn’t really need them. That teaches me a lesson.”

“It still indicates that the Silver Syndicate is involved in the bigger mess.”

“So, we’ll tell the NCA once we’ve delivered our case to the CPS. The Silvers are just cogs on an awfully large wheel. That wheel is the NCA’s problem, not ours, at least not yet.”

Prieto’s brief was another lawyer from the same firm. When Helen and Brian walked into the interrogation room, he said, “My client wishes to confess to the murder of Jennifer Kilborn.”

That was it. Beyond the confession, Prieto provided no more information. He refused to admit looking for a list, saying it was just a fight between Jennifer and him.

Helen studied Brian’s reaction. He’d got what he wanted: He’d excluded NCA from their case. *But wouldn’t he wonder about the big picture?* She sure did!

As if he’d read her mind, in the hallway he said after they’d taken Prieto away, “There’s a lot more to this story. Maybe I can get Carter to tell me how it all ends sometime in the future.”

“Are you sure he really killed Jennifer?”

“Yes. What’s still to be determined is who exactly wanted that list and sent him to get it. Prieto was just a blunt instrument in a murder. The person or persons who wielded it are the true criminals.”

She felt extremely tired, and he noticed. “Go home to your family and get some rest, Helen. We’ll work on our reports tomorrow.”

## A Good Place to Die

Adrian Huxley parked the little EV from the station's carpool and turned to his sergeant. "Fair warning: You'll not see these people in the best of circumstances. Nor will they ever see or understand you. They'll always be trying to ignore or put themselves above any riffraff, and that includes the police."

Julie O'Hanlon smiled at him. "I suppose you knew the victim?"

"Knew of him. I am a few years older, and, for children, a few years might as well be a generation. Besides, Stephen Trumbull became a pompous lout, a gadfly; I became a detective inspector. It would be difficult for even a detective with skills like Hercule Poirot's to find any redeeming qualities in Stephen if he were still alive."

"Did he become an embarrassment for Lord and Lady Trumbull?"

"Maybe, but I really have no idea. I left their world of privilege the moment I entered university."

"Quite an estate, boss."

*She must have decided to change the topic, a bitter one for me,* he had to admit.

"You haven't seen all of it. It's the typical status symbol of a dying aristocracy. I suppose murdering one of them is but a premonition that signals that impending doom. It's rotting from the top down, beginning with the royal family."

"Many Brits still adore their royals, Adrian."

"The more fools they. At least the Lord and Lady of this manor aren't offering tours or trying to turn their humble abode into a museum like so many do to avoid the tax man."

By that time, they'd walked up to the huge double door. Adrian pulled the chain, and they heard the chimes sound within.

The butler, dressed in a three-piece, the coat with tails and shoes with spats, opened the door and eyed Adrian. He felt like he was getting scanned at Heathrow by one of those security machines. "I thought I recognized the name. You've grown up, Master Adrian."

"That's inevitable. And you haven't changed a bit, you ugly old grouch. We're here to investigate the murder. My companion is Detective Sergeant Julie O'Hanlon, and I'm now Detective Inspector Adrian Huxley. I'll be the SIO for the case. Have the SOCOs and pathologist arrived?"

"They have if I've managed to understand those police acronyms correctly. They drove around the house to the back lily pond where Master Stephen's body was found."

"Anyone take your statement, Reggie?"

"Not yet. Nor the Lord nor Lady's. We did a bit of a lie-in this morning due to the gala last evening."

"Hangovers love company. Quite a bash, I suppose. It's not every day that some bloke is foolish enough to have the courage to join this family. I assume the betrothed and her beau's partygoers all went their separate ways. I'll need a list."

"I'll have the Lady's social secretary prepare that for you."

"Is the old devil and his boss up and willing to chat?"

"Lord Trumbull is in his study. The Lady is a bit indisposed and sends her apologies."

"I see. We'll talk to her later then. Lead the way. I might as well get it over with and say hello to the old fool."

Julie dug an elbow into Alvin's side as they followed Reggie down a long corridor, made a turn into another, and came to a wide door. "You're being a bit irascible, you know. I thought you knew how to handle British elites."

"Oh, I do. One must better each other with clever insults to show one is more pretentious and conceited than the competition. You can't play that game, so say nothing unless you're asked directly."

"Because I'm too low-class and will embarrass you?"

"No, because I'll have to protect you. They're not normal people. Far from it."

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Reggie knocked on the door and a voice inside commanded, "Come in."

"Detective Inspector Adrian Huxley and Detective Sergeant Julie O'Hanlon to see you, sir."

Lord Trumbull jumped out of his chair, ran to Adrian, and embraced him. "Adrian, my lad, you must find Stephen's murderer! Lady Margaret is driving me nuts. As if I could do anything about it! My foolish son let himself be killed!"

Julie noted there was no sorrow nor remorse, only criticism, in Lord Trumbull's voice.

"I understand she's indisposed. That should give you at least a few moments of peace and quiet."

Trumbull pointed to the phone. "She's calling me here every five minutes, damn her. Even with the doctor's sedatives. I curse the invention of mobiles."

"And how are you doing, sir?"

"Um, better than I could have ever imagined. I suppose it hasn't hit me just yet. And you'll remember that I'm an old regiment commander. I saw a few bodies back in the day, so I suppose I'm a bit used to death."

Adrian smiled. Trumbull had shipped out to the old Yugoslavia towards the end of the war there. Adrian doubted he'd seen many bodies, but maybe the military training had made him tolerate his wife a bit better.

"Shall we sit and have a good chat, lad? I haven't seen you in years."

"You haven't seen me since I was fifteen, sir. And we or someone else on my team will return to get your and the Lady's statements, as well as those of the staff. Reggie promised me a list of participants in last evening's gala, by the way."

"Good for him. Quite indispensable, that old fellow. I won't keep you two from your duties then, but do return. We need to reminisce a bit. And your African companion here has an Irish name. I'd like to hear how that occurred as well."

Adrian gave Julie a warning look. "We'll be busy, sir, but we'll try to find the time. I know where the lily pond is, so we'll just find our way back there now."

As they went around the house, past the back gardens, and began to cross the slightly rising terrain of the immense lawn, Julie couldn't help herself. "I'm not African. I was born in London."

"He's an ignorant prat, Julie. A nice old bloke most of the time, if memory serves, and relatively harmless, but he can utter barbarous things not even King Charlie would dare say. There are worse toffs too, so I can cut him some slack if needs be."

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Even if he hadn't known where the lily pond could be found, the pathologist's tent marked the crime scene. It was large enough for Dr. Browning and his assistant but would be crowded when the two detectives joined the party—the pathologist would be doing his clumsy,



crouching imitation of some Russian dance around the body—so Adrian was happy that the doctor stepped outside the tent to greet them.

“Inspector, Sergeant, welcome to this comedy of necrophilia, starring Mr. Stephen Trumbull.” Phineas Browning had a strange sense of humor; Adrian thought it might have something to do with his profession. “I won’t shake your hands because of where they’ve just been, and if you want to join me inside my field theater, please don the appropriate costumes.”

Adrian and Julie showed they already had gloves on. “A closer inspection is unnecessary considering that I’ll receive your usual invitation to join your séance at the morgue. I presume COD corresponds to one of the stab wounds or bleeding out from more of them, and TOD was some time last evening or early this morning. Had he been in the water?”

“A good question, Inspector. That would indeed make determining TOD a bit more difficult. The answer to your query is no, but the murderer had a bit of ironic humor to pose the man holding some water lilies. Nothing Monet would ever paint, of course, but an impressionist touch in pastel colors nonetheless clashing against the red. And I’m afraid I can’t narrow the window for TOD. Late evening or early morning it must be, because Lord Trumbull told one of your PCs that he ordered the groundskeeper to give the entire area the once over, and he saw nothing on his walk-around.” He shot Adrian a sly wink. “I bet the old bloke thought some of the younger generations at the bash might like a romantic walk around the pond on a moonlit night.”

“It was cloudy last night,” Julie said.

“And so it was, my dear. Perhaps a better night for more serious romancing then, although I haven’t seen any condoms lying about littering this pristine landscape.”

Julie blushed; Adrian smiled. “That comment dates you, Doctor. Other forms of protection are more popular now, and a young lad like Stephen probably wouldn’t be carrying, and he’d be expecting proper young ladies to be prepared.” Julie’s blush deepened. “But I’m sure that if any romantic trysts took place, our capable SOCOs will find evidence for it. Which, by the way, leads to the obvious question.”

“And to my obvious answer: There’s no evidence that the young Mr. Trumbull participated in any romantic tryst, but I’ll determine that among many other things once I have his body on my examination table. I’ll have my assistant give you a call when I’m ready to entertain you tomorrow.”

“May I return to your comment about a floral arrangement? Could it be mockery, Dr. Browning? I don’t think Stephen was gay.”

“Are you asking if the killer could be a woman?” Adrian nodded. “Um, a jilted woman might display such creative rage, but the deep penetration of the knife more likely indicates a man. Yet a very strong female assailant might still have feelings for the bloke in the aftermath. You have a complex case to solve, Adrian, beginning with an aristocratic psychology that’s never easy to fathom.”

“I’ll be waiting for your call, Phineas.” Adrian turned to Julie. “We should get the PCs deployed a bit better and then return to the station to organize the rest of the team. Before leaving, though, on our way past the house, let’s see if old Reggie has the list of attendees ready.”

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Julie drove the EV back to the station because Adrian wanted a quiet moment in the car to organize his thoughts. That required her silence, so she got lost in her own mental wanderings.

When Adrian Huxley had arrived at their Midlands Constabulary’s substation a few years earlier, Julie had shared some of the initial gossip of her colleagues: He seemed to be a toff

dandy, another new university graduate taking advantage of the accelerated-career program, and possibly one of those effeminate chaps who should have remained in the closet. He couldn't help his often-aristocratic bearing—like King Charlie, he'd been born into that. And made into a pariah by his own family who thought no one with good breeding should ever become a copper! He also didn't tout his Oxford education—he used the skills of critical thinking obtained there and honed by his sojourn at the Peel Centre to solve cases that many would have found baffling, if not unsolvable.

As for his supposed gayness, she knew her boss had both male and female friends, and he was very demanding about the qualities a woman must possess to become even a close friend let alone his soulmate. He'd confessed to her once that he'd met only a few who could possibly qualify for the latter, but they were all married. She'd always wondered if that small group of potential mates might include her because in a way he was like a "work husband" whom she spent more time with than her own husband and family, but she was already married with children and ten-years older than he was when he arrived at the station to become her boss.

She understood him better than she understood most men, including her own husband. She found it amusing that others didn't, the criminal elements doing so at their peril. Like the king and all their ilk, he would appear to many to be a pampered, ornamental twit. He wasn't. Far from it. He wouldn't have climbed the ladder from DC to DI so rapidly otherwise, and his praise and promotions received from their police superiors showed that they were aware of how valuable an officer he was.

"I'll leave you to the onerous task of preparing a crime board and organizing all the troops," he said as she backed into an empty space in the station's car park. "Interviewing all the gala's guests and staff will take days, I suppose, so I will request some additional aid for our initial interviews. The DCI would just call me in anyway, so it's better to take the bull by the horns before he gets up a full head of steam." He smiled. "I dare say Hemingway couldn't have done that metaphor much better."

"Your bull might be foaming at the mouth and ready to charge even without your waving a red cape. Better said, because the case involves Lord Trumbull's son, he's probably all set to gore you."

"Um, I didn't need that addition to my metaphor. Carry on, Julie, but you can pity me as well. After all, even the Home Secretary must deal with an irascible superior."

*Yes, she thought, the PM had that reputation. The Guardian* had always reported on his verbal altercations with the king.

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"Come in, Adrian." After he took a seat, DCI Harry Lamb said, "I just got off the phone with the Lord Mayor and Chief Superintendent. They want this wrapped up quickly. Anything jump out at you?"

"Early days, sir. Hours, to be more precise. TOD needs to be better established, and we'll be waiting for forensics. It's a complicated case if only for the number of people possibly involved. We have a lot of partygoers and staff to interview. Is there any chance we can get some assistance from other stations in the district?"

"I'll see what I can do. The Lord Mayor was there, of course. Said he left early."

"He's the bride-to-be's maternal uncle, sir. We'll be interviewing him as well. If he arrived late, he might have left his vehicle in the back car park. You can see the pond where the murder occurred from there, so maybe he spotted something."

"For God sakes, don't give the mayor a tough time. Nor Lord and Lady Trumbull."

*I'll treat them like everyone else*, Adrian thought. "Did he, the Super, or you know the victim at all."

"I never met him. I don't socialize with the Trumbulls."

*Because you're a lowly copper, just like me*. "But obviously the mayor does. We'll see about the Super. I want to develop as complete a picture as I can of the victim. While the attack seemed to be filled with rage, I believe there must be a motive."

"Eliminate the family as suspects quickly, Adrian. You should be able to do that. As I understand it, Stephen didn't spend too much time there."

"What do we know about the groom-to-be?"

"I have nothing to offer. Obviously, the old toff's daughter approves of him. Is she the oldest now that Stephen's gone?"

"Good question. She might get everything now when the Lord and Lady pass on. People have killed for less."

"Oh, I didn't mean for you to go there. I doubt anyone in the family killed Stephen, so eliminating them as suspects should be easy enough. Anyway, keep me posted. As soon as you have a bone with meat on it, let me know and we'll do a press conference. The media are going to be all over this one.":

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The bride-to-be continued to wring her hands as she said, "I told him I didn't want him here at the announcement of my engagement or at my wedding!" Despite the handwringing, her face was red with anger.

While the vitriol didn't seem to be at the level needed to kill her older brother, it had surprised the sergeant. So did her last words as an answer to Julie's simple question about whether Sheila Trumbull had noticed brother Stephen's presence at the fete. "You must have a good reason for saying that."

"Of course I do! He despised Roger. Well, Stephen isn't the one marrying Roger. I am!"

Julie nodded. "He didn't approve of the marriage, I assume."

"My older brother has always been an over-protective arse who's tried to control my life. Between Papa and him, I became a virtual prisoner in this damnable house."

*And yet you managed to attract a young man?* "So...Stephen wasn't invited to the fete?"

"Papa tried to convince him to come. It was a question of whether he'd obey my wishes or Papa's. I guess he just came long enough to be murdered!" She broke into tears.

Julie nodded to the FLO who handed Sheila another tissue. "And yet no one saw him in the house or on the patio. Did you?"

"I said no. Aren't you listening?" She couldn't know that this was a standard technique: Catch a suspect in a lie. *And Sheila Trumbull is definitely a suspect after that tirade!* "Maybe he was already dead?" That question was whispered.

Julie shrugged. "It's certainly possible. We can't find anyone who knows how Stephen even arrived on the property. And an arrival was necessary because he no longer lives here."

"Yes, he has his own flat nearer Birmingham center. The son had his independence; the daughter was a prisoner."

"Yes, we visited that flat. It seems that he showered and dressed and headed for here about nine p.m. The security guard in the lobby of his building saw him drive away in his sports car. We have yet to find that car."

She gulped and thought a moment. "Could it be the simple case of a carjacking that turned deadly? That car was super-expensive."

“Yes, and not so simple if it turned into murder. That wouldn’t explain his being found by the lily pond, though. It’s as if he was just out for a stroll when he was attacked. He was smoking a small cigar.”

“Yes, he liked those damned things.” She shuddered and hugged herself. “How can I have a wedding now?”

“Your family and friends will be supportive, I’m sure.”

“Papa wasn’t keen on Roger either but wanted me to be happy. Mum was intensely in favor of a wedding, the prospect of grandchildren, and so forth. She was ready to disown Stephen for not accepting Roger. She couldn’t understand why Stephen was being such a numpty about it.”

“I have yet to meet this Roger. Tell me about him. How and where did you two meet?”

“Roger Livingstone. Papa hired him to improve my tennis game.” She reddened a bit. “We just clicked. You know how it is when you meet your soulmate. Roger’s mother, Mrs. Livingstone, has more money than God, so he doesn’t have to support himself, but he likes tennis so much that he decided that he wanted to teach others to love the game. That’s what drove him.”

*As well as probably improving his chances to seduce young women?* Julie asked herself. She made a mental note to confirm whether Roger’s mother was “richer than God.” Roger might have been looking to marry into money and didn’t quite see Sheila as a soulmate. *Did Stephen know that and threaten to expose Roger for being a gold-digger?*

Adrian would be questioning Roger Livingstone. *We’ll have to compare notes.*

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“How did your son support himself?” Adrian said to Lord Trumbull.

They were seated around the fireplace in the large study of the Trumbull family’s mansion. Adrian’s eagle eyes had already taken in some of the books on the shelves, many first editions and all looking well-read by generations of Trumbulls.

The old man sighed. “He’d flit like a hummingbird from one ‘sure thing’ to another ‘sure thing,’ but he never held down a steady job. He studied something entirely useless. Margaret?”

Lady Trumbull seemed to wake up from a daydream. “Not useless, Henry. English History and Literature. He tried to teach for a couple of years, Adrian, but it wasn’t his thing. He had ADHD as a child.”

“That was as good an excuse as any,” Lord Trumbull said. “He was like Ernest.”

“Ernest?” Julie said.

“*The Importance of Being Ernest*,” Margaret said. “From that Irish writer, Oscar Wilde.”

Julie and Adrian nodded. That was a play about a man of wealth who was a ne’er-do-well. Julie knew about it; Adrian had read it a few times.

“Did you take care of his bills?” Adrian said.

“He received a monthly allowance,” Lord Trumbull said. “Money down the drain, I dare say.”

“He was a bit lost,” Margaret said, “but we couldn’t let him starve or be homeless, could we?”

*Might have kept him out of trouble, Adrian thought. Or taught him some responsibility.* “Could you provide us with a list of his close friends and old schoolmates?”

“Some had washed their hands of him,” Margaret said, “but no one would have killed him. We don’t know them all. And he’s been very secretive for a while.”

“For how long?” Julie said.

“Maybe two years?” She looked at her husband, who nodded. “He seemed to only show up here to have a row with Roger, and Sheila hated that, of course.”

Adrian stood. “If you two can think of anything else, just call us.” He handed the Lord and Lady a copy of his card; Julie did the same. “Equally, we might return with further questions. Someone in Stephen’s life disliked him enough to kill your son. Who that is might be buried among all those two years of secrets. Who else in the family was close to Stephen?”

“My brother and Stephen were close,” Lady Trumbull said.

“Was he here last night?” Julie said, only to confirm what they already knew and that the Trumbulls knew it as well.

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll be talking to him.”

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After the interview with the Trumbulls, Adrian adjusted who on his team did what. They focused more on Stephen’s life outside the family, especially those during those two secretive years; only a few DCs and PCs interviewed family members who’d attended Sheila and Roger’s engagement ceremony.

Stephen’s activities were hard to trace, but his little sports car helped. People remembered the classic red roadster and the Bohemian-style ruffian who drove it. Following it all still took time, but they managed to put together a picture of a debauched young man who liked to gamble, do drugs, and have one-night stands with many women. But over a year ago, he’d become more focused and even more secretive.

“Who’s the woman?” Adrian said when Julie placed a photo of Stephen with a statuesque brunette in front of a night club. The two were with an older man. “And the little weasel?”

“Both a major part of Stephen’s recent life. Some people from a casino too. I’ve gathered a lot of information. We’re not sure who the woman is. Mr. Weasel has some form. Narcotics Division knows him but can’t pin anything major on him. The casino people are from a place where Stephen likes to gamble. I guess we can say they were all an important part of his wasted life before he was killed.”

“Okay. Did he have gambling debts?”

“Not sure. In some video data, it looks like he was being pressured a bit. The weasel is Roy Bixby, someone Narcotics thinks supplies product to dealers. We can’t put those pieces of the jigsaw together yet to make a complete picture. Stephen might stay with the woman from time to time. She was his main squeeze until he was murdered.”

“She’ll be the weakest link in the chain. Let’s find her and talk to her. She might be able to fill in the rest of the details. No one on the team knows who she is?”

“Eddie Hebert—he’s a PC on loan to us—has seen her somewhere but can’t quite remember where. He’s going to show that same photo to his wife. They haven’t had kids yet and just got married, so they’re still able to party a bit, I guess. That’s where he thinks he saw her, in some tavern or nightspot.”

“Work on that. Let’s get Mr. Bixby into an interrogation room ASAP too. We’ll have one of the Narc lads sit in.”

“He’ll just say ‘no comment,’ boss, unless we have something on him. And you’ll essentially be warning him if he was up to no good with Stephen.”

“Good point. Let’s find out more about him. Both Mr. Bixby and the woman might be small-time players compared to the casino lads. They’ll be the harder nuts to crack. Let’s go after some of the people who work for them to at least find out why Stephen seems to be one of their

favorite persons. Or maybe Hebert's wife will have a better memory than he does." He waved a hand at all the papers and notes on his desk. "I'm trying to make sense of all this. Too bad that the Trumbulls weren't closer to their son."

"I bet Lord Trumbull didn't want to know what his son was involved in. His daughter certainly didn't."

"And that reminds me. We two have an appointment to talk with Roger Livingstone. I decided you should join me. We're eliminating suspects right and left. We might as well eliminate him."

"And Sheila?"

Adrian nodded. "No sisterly love there, but it's hard to believe that she'd kill him. But I don't know about Roger. Is his mother as rich as they say?"

"Old wealth plus new. The father is a CE who owns a construction company specialized in ship building. Lots of government contracts still. The mother's now the CEO. Every Tory in Commons knows her, I'd wager. Roger doesn't need Sheila's money, that's for sure."

"I still want to talk to him. Maybe he knows a bit about Stephen to justify his dislike for the bloke."

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"Take them to the small conference room," Adrian heard Roger Livingstone tell his PA over the intercom. He met Julie and Adrian there and shook their hands.

"Any news about finding Stephen's killer?"

"We're not here for that exactly," Julie said. "We're still interviewing people who attended the engagement party. Looking for possible witnesses, Mr. Livingstone."

He took a seat and gestured for them to follow his example. "I suppose you've heard from various sources that I didn't like Stephen very much. Sheila came around to my way of thinking too, so I'm not the only one. I think Lord and Lady Trumbull showed remarkable patience and restraint with the wanker, to be honest."

"Any particular flaws that you'd like to point out that support that characterization of him as a wanker?" Adrian said.

"Aye, let me count the ways." Roger pulled an index finger. "One: He was addicted to gambling. Two: I think he was dealing drugs to pay off gambling debts. Three: I never saw him with a respectable woman, so there was little chance that someone could ever make him settle down. And four: He hated me, calling my family 'nouveau riche' and low class. Britain was built on the backs of entrepreneurs like my father, not old, useless aristocrats like Sheila's."

"I assume you don't share that last opinion with Sheila or her parents," Julie said.

"I think the Trumbulls are nice enough and basically harmless in the grand scheme of things. But His Majesty's kingdom will survive and thrive because of people like my father, not them. It's not the nineteenth century, after all."

"Did you ever have direct confrontations with Stephen?" Adrian said.

"I was patient with the pillock for Sheila's sake, although she had some rows with him that got physical at times."

"In what way?" Julie said.

"One or two slaps from her. He did have enough control not to strike back. I was ready to step in, but he'd just spin around and leave her standing there furious at him."

"Let's return to the gambling debts and drugs dealing," Adrian said. "Do you have proof the latter was used to pay off the former?"

“That’s very perceptive of you, Inspector. I have no direct proof and never mentioned my suspicions to the family, but I did suspect him of supplying drugs to other toffs’ children to pay off his gambling debts. Gossip, if you will. The aristocracies live by it. Despite his character flaws, he seemed to be a proud man. As far as I know, he never asked Lord Trumbull for financial help. He could have lived off his allowance if it weren’t for the gambling, you see. The Trumbulls are well off.”

“And you’ll enjoy some of that now?” Julie said.

“Sheila has her allowance too. But I don’t need her or their money, officers. I’m marrying Sheila because I love her. Of course, some would describe things differently: I pursued her until she caught me.” Roger laughed. “Over time, though, we found that our world views were quite similar. We’re in for the long haul, but I’ll admit we’re still trying to decide which one of us should run for Parliament. We each think the other would be a good PM, I dare say.”

*A big ego is the first requirement of any politician, Julie thought.*

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Hebert’s wife came through with a name for Stephen’s girlfriend: Melody Simons was a singer in a nightclub. Julie and PC Hebert brought her in for questioning even though she was fighting off a hangover and maybe still a bit high from drugs.

When Adrian and Julie entered the interrogation room, Melody looked sideways at Julie, her bloodshot eyes perhaps initially seeing multiple images but clearing for a moment. “I know you. You’re Sergeant Julie.” She sighed. “I’m a bit out of it. My boyfriend was murdered. How’d you feel if your boyfriend was murdered? I can’t remember what you and the constable told me. Am I under arrest?”

“No, Melody,” Adrian said. “But do you still not want legal representation? We’re only looking for information, but you have the right to have a legal representative.”

“Um, yes, information about Stephen. Now I remember. I suppose anything I say about him doesn’t matter now, does it? I kept warning him.”

“About what exactly?” Julie said.

Melody took a moment to organize what she had to say. “Stephen thought he had a system for winning at cards, and he thought he also had one for dealing drugs, but he only had shite for brains. The first system lost money, so he invented the second. But that ran afoul of Roy the Rat.”

“Roy the Rat?” Julie said.

“What I and quite a few others call Roy Bixby. Has two rat-like upper front teeth are like those of that shapeshifter in the Harry Potter stories. Roy’s not a dealer; he’s the wholesale supplier to dealers. That’s all I know ‘bout ‘im. ‘Cept he undresses me with them little beady rat eyes of his.”

“So, he supplied Stephen with the wholesale goods?” Adrian said.

“Yes. I’d look at ‘im first. I think Stephen was skimming some of the profits and Roy found out.”

“How’d that happen? Couldn’t Stephen charge anything he wanted for the retail goods if he paid what Roy asked for wholesale?”

“These people aren’t Nobel prize winners in economics, Inspector. The product costs Roy so much, so he says he wants at least that from his dealers plus twenty percent of the profits, say. Nearer Stephen or his like come to wholesale prices, the more Roy suspects a scam.” She laughed. “A lot of toffs’ brats pay good money for a line of coke; they’re so hooked and think it’s the in-thing everyone is doing. And from what Stephen made, he had to pay some of his

gambling debts. That worked for a while, but the gambling debts increased, so Stephen raised the prices for the drugs he sold, and Roy benefitted less because Stephen kept more. I'm not good at all those high finance and business machinations either, but I think Stephen just let it get out of control."

"Are you saying Roy killed Stephen?" Adrian said.

Melody shrugged. "Get me out of here and off to a vacation in Spain, all alone and without any men around, and I'll say anything you want me to say."

Both Julie and Adrian frowned. *Is anything she telling us true?* thought Adrian. Melody was rational enough to react to their frowns. She looked at the low ceiling, bloodshot eyes seeming to look through it.

"Lord, have mercy and give me a bent copper when I need one. You people are no fun at all. Think about what I told you: It's either Roy who killed Stephen or the casino owners. Better stated for both cases, some hit man they hired did it. Maybe they even went together on the hiring."

"Interesting story," Adrian said. "But there's only one problem with it: It doesn't explain why Stephen went to the gala celebrating his sister's engagement. Most people would think he'd have done a runner if he believed he was in danger." He smiled. "Spain, for example."

"Oh, you plods don't have a clue, do you? He went to that gala looking for a loan from the rich old man."

"Lord Trumbull?"

"Heavens no! His uncle. He had some leverage with that old bloke."

"What kind of leverage?"

"The best kind but also the most dangerous: He knew about the mayor's mistress."

"The Lord Mayor has a mistress?"

"What else would you call that secretary he sleeps with when his wife's out of town?"

Melody shrugged. "Sometimes even when she's in town, using the excuse of a late meeting. And 'tis an interesting story, no doubt about it. A sad one too. Stephen brought all this trouble on himself. There are always people who will help you ruin your life if that's what you seem to be asking for."

Both officers saw the tears starting.

"You loved him, didn't you?" Julie said.

Melody nodded. "Yes, damn him. Like no other man I've ever met. He was handsome, rich, and from a good family, but he didn't lord it over everyone like that arse who's going to marry his sister."

"You know Roger Livingstone?" Adrian said.

Melody wiped away some tears and managed a smile. "Know him? I'm carrying his child. Stephen said it didn't matter, that he'd marry me, and we'd raise the baby as our own. Now I don't know what I'll do."

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Julie and Adrian sat in the pool car for a bit before they entered the city offices to interview the Lord Mayor.

"I don't know how much of what Melody said I can believe, if any," Adrian said. "I'm a bit leery of confronting the Lord Mayor as a result."

"I suppose Roger and Stephen's stories might differ a bit, but why would she lie about the baby?"



"She might be lying about who the father is. Stephen's dead, but maybe she thinks she can get child support from Roger."

"A paternity test would settle that. Roger's not a Trumbull."

"True enough if he's amenable to taking one. Let's get our visit with the Lord Mayor over with."

After waiting about twenty minutes, the mayor's PA showed the two detectives into a conference room; the mayor soon joined him.

"I've heard of you, Inspector. You're an unusual police officer with your quality pedigree." He winked at Julie. "Some time, when neither of us is in a hurry, we must discuss how you decided to become one. How can I help you two today?"

"Just a few questions, sir. Was Stephen Trumbull blackmailing you?"

Julie glanced at her boss. He must have decided to hit hard from the start.

The mayor frowned. "What made you think that was occurring?"

"We understand that he went to his sister's engagement party to ask you for money. Would that have been the first time, or was that an ongoing activity?"

"I'll be out of office in three months, Inspector. When that occurs, I'll be divorcing my wife. Does that answer your question?"

"Partially. Were you paying Stephen to keep it quiet until then?"

The mayor leaned back in this chair and folded his hands over his ample stomach. He would have been a large man even without it. "Let's say we were negotiating terms. Stephen knows—knew—a lot of people in media. He could have created quite a scandal for me, not something I needed to end my service to the public. He needed to cover some gambling debts. I felt a bit guilty about that. I took him to Monte Carlo when he was fourteen, not knowing that gambling would become his addiction. I refused to pay Roy Bixby, though. I told Stephen he'd have to handle that on his own."

"You know Roy Bixby?"

"I had several encounters with him when I was a magistrate. Roy is a gutter rat who makes money by creating misery for others. Stephen should never have had anything to do with him."

"You two, Stephen and you, were close?"

"I'm certain I was more a father for him than his real one. Lord Trumbull failed to give Stephen a proper education about the finer things in life or the dangers in pursuing them to excess. Trumbie is a boring man, Inspector."

"Seems like you failed to educate Stephen in the control and restraint part."

The mayor shrugged. "I can't do everything. His personal flaws led him to that lack of control and restraint, I dare say, and I'm not sure I could have taught him that."

"Did you agree to meet him to discuss financial problems at the engagement party?"

"No. Frankly, I never expected him to appear there. Roger and Stephen were like oil and water."

"Do you think Roger disliked Stephen enough to kill him?"

"Roger has his own problems. I wouldn't blame Stephen's girlfriend if she blackmails the bastard. Sheila doesn't know what she's getting into, poor thing. She's very naïve."

"Are you close to her too?"

"Not like I was with Stephen. She's a bit too much like her father, a boring woman who has no idea about how to enjoy life. Say, none of this will be made public, will it? I'm just trying to help you folks find Stephen's killer. Even with his flaws, I loved that lad."

"I'm sure that if there's a trial, it will occur after your term ends. Then it won't matter, correct?"

"No, I suppose not. The media will go crazy for a few days, and then it will all fade away."

"Any suggestions for us about who might have murdered Stephen?"

"My first guess would be Roy Bixby, but I wouldn't discount Roger Livingstone if I were you. He's ruthless like his father."

"Do you happen to know how much Stephen was in debt?"

"He never said exactly, and Roy's claims are open to debate. As far as I'm concerned, Stephen just beat that rat at his own game. Of course, I don't know any of the details. I don't want to know them."

"Understood. Would you have loaned Stephen money if he'd asked?"

The Lord Mayor sighed. "It would depend on how desperate the lad was. Considering what occurred, in retrospect he must have been very desperate because he knew someone was after him, but I had no way of knowing that. It's a damn tragedy, that's what it is!"

"Do you have any idea where Roy might be found?"

"If he murdered Stephen, he's long gone, and you'll never find him. You should ask Melody. If he stuck around, he's probably badgering her now."

"Does he know she's carrying Roger's child?"

The mayor's response in words was signaled by his raised, bushy eyebrows. "Now there's a scenario I hadn't considered. That rat could blackmail Roger, Sheila, or even Lord Trumbull with that. Hopefully he's not intelligent enough to figure that out."

"But he wouldn't have remained in the area if he was the one who murdered Stephen, would he?"

"Can't see that happening, no. Good luck, officers. You're going to need it."

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"Boss, that Roger Livingstone has just shown up at Melody Simons flat. Should I just continue to observe?"

Adrian had put a PC on stakeout duty at Melody's house just in case Roger or Roy showed up there. "If he tries to leave, block his exit. Julie and I will be right there."

Adrian went two-thirds of the way with blues and twos, but then shut everything down. Still on the road, the PC called them again. "That toff Lord Trumbull showed up now too."

"Same plan. Don't let anyone leave!"

When they arrived, the PC joined them at their car. "I can't tell what's going on inside. Will we be arresting someone?"

"Maybe just a few quick questions to see why they're here. Actually, I know something about why Roger's here. I wonder if Lord Trumbull found out his secret."

"Secret?"

"I'll update you if there's time."

"You think something's going to happen, don't you?" Julie said.

"Let's hope I'm wrong. If Lord Trumbull—" There were two shots. "Let's move in!"

The PC was a large man compared to Adrian and Julie. He broke down the door. They entered just in time to see Lord Trumbull dash out the backdoor and head down the fire escape. Roger and Melody were on the floor.

"Follow him! I'll go out the front!"

The PC soon returned and joined Adrian at the front of the building. “He must have run around the block. Lord Trumbull took off in his Rover, sir.”

“Let’s see what’s going on inside.”

Julie was kneeling by Roger Livingstone who was still alive. Melody was dead.

“Get the old bastard!” Roger’s request was barely a whisper, but it was dripping with desire for revenge. “He killed my Melody and our baby! He’s going after Roy Bixby. Find Roy and you’ll find the old man.” Those were Roger’s last words.

Events came at a more leisurely pace after that. Adrian left Julie and the PC at Melody’s to wait for the pathologist and SOCOs. He’d considered what Roger had said and concluded that he had it all wrong: The old toff was bound to lead him to Roy, not the other way around. And the reason that Lord Trumbull wanted Roy must be that Roger or Melody had told him that Roy had killed Stephen. Perhaps the Lord Mayor was wrong, and Lord Trumbull loved his son at least enough to seek revenge against Roy the Rat.

Adrian returned to the station and put out a BOLF for both Lord Trumbull and Roy. He then reoriented all the team in the field to find either of those men, not only in their county but in the four surrounding ones as well. He was then faced with two choices: Stay in the station and wait for someone to spot the toff or the drug dealer or visit someone who might have an idea where Lord Trumbull might be.

Adrian decided that someone would be Lady Trumbull.

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It took valuable time to let her know what had occurred. Her reaction was a mix of emotions—tears for her daughter, anger at Roger, and worry about what her husband might do. “You actually saw him shoot Roger and this Melody woman? Did they kill Stephen?”

“We don’t know for sure, but I think not, my lady. Some would call those three members of a love triangle. I can’t go into details simply because we don’t know all of them. I think Lord Trumbull must have learned a lot about what happened. Unfortunately, he didn’t let us know, and he tried to take matters into his own hands.”

“He was reading something last night in the study when he suddenly grabbed his coat and hat and dashed off. I called after him. He just said, ‘I’ll be back!’ over his shoulder. God knows where he went at that hour of the night.”

“What was he reading?”

“Let me go see. It’s possible he left it on his desk.”

Adrian followed her into the study. She waved a small leather-bound book at him. “Stephen’s agenda. I wondered where that had disappeared to. My son was a bit old-fashioned, you see, and not too careful about charging his phone, so he used an agenda. Henry must have found it hidden somewhere in Stephen’s room.”

Adrian took it and thumbed through it. The entries were terse and mostly in shorthand. “Would your husband understand these entries?”

“He taught Stephen his own shorthand years ago. My son might have modified it a bit, but Henry would understand a lot of it.”

One entry from earlier that day Stephen was murdered was underlined in red. “Payoff mtg w RB.”

“Would Lord Trumbull have known who RB is?”

She thought a moment. “That might be Roy Bixby. Stephen knew him from school, and I think they had a few business deals going. I don’t know the man personally. Stephen went away for school.” She sighed. “That was the thing to do back then. I argued about that with Henry, but

he thought it had been good for him to go away, so what was good for him must be good for Stephen. I thought it only created barriers between Stephen and us, but Henry is a bit headstrong about these things. A traditionalist, you know.”

“Do you have any idea where your husband is, Lady Trumbull?”

“Not really. I thought he had arranged for a bit of hunting with the groundskeeper today, but I haven’t seen either one around to be honest.”

“Here on the property?”

“The woods past the pond, of course. Henry prefers hunting to fishing.” She pointed to the gun case on one wall. “The shotgun’s gone, though, along with that Russian revolver he picked up in Yugoslavia. So, he took off to go hunting without even saying anything to me. Typical. He’s becoming a bit forgetful in his old age, Adrian.”

“Indeed. The woods past the pond, you say?” She nodded. “I’ll just take a quick look, if you don’t mind.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I believe he might have a meeting with Roy Bixby. Stephen owed Roy money.”

“Oh my. More trouble. Go find him, Adrian. Stop all this nonsense, please. I think I’ll have a sherry while I wait to settle my nerves.”

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Adrian heard the voices before he saw the duo.

“You don’t have the goolies to pull that trigger, Lord Trumbull,” Roy said and then laughed. “Against an unarmed man? I want what you promised me. It will only be a down payment, you realize.”

Adrian rounded the shed to see Lord Trumbull pointing a shotgun at Roy the Rat.

“You don’t think I realized that? As soon as you returned my call, I planned this.” He gave the satchel at his feet a kick. “It’s full of shredded newspaper. Did you think I’d let you blackmail me the rest of my life like you planned to do with Stephen?”

Roy looked surprised for a moment—Adrian thought he’d underestimated the old toff—and then he emitted a growl and reached into his coat. The shotgun blast blew half his head off.

“I’ll take the gun, Lord Trumbull,” Adrian said quietly, even though he knew there was another barrel ready to be fired.

The lord of the manor turned and handed it stock first to Adrian. “Welcome to the party, lad. You see, it wasn’t enough that this yob killed my son. He wanted to blackmail me as well. Said he was going to publicize how Stephen had run up gambling debts and was paying them off by selling drugs. He was also going to tell the world how Roger was having a child with a known prostitute, which would ruin my daughter and his life.”

“You should have told us, sir.”

“And have the bastard say all those things and then get off free on some technicality? No, Adrian, it was a question of family honor. While I don’t have much respect for Roger, Stephen was a good kid who simply went astray, and he wasn’t scum of the earth like Roy there.” He jerked a thumb back towards the body and then held his arms out. “Go ahead and arrest me, lad, but I know I did everyone a service by eliminating that garbage.”

“Not your wife and daughter.”

“They’ll be fine. Sheila and Stephen grew up without me around; Lady Trumbull survived my absences as well. I spent most of my life overseas. I won’t be a burden to them either.”

Before Adrian could stop Trumbull, he pulled out the Russian revolver. “You probably understand better than anyone. Honor is everything, and this is as good place as any to die.” The gun fired.

Adrian put on gloves, walked over to Roy’s corpse first, and found the pistol, still inside Roy the Rat’s coat but his hand upon it. “He was drawing on you, sir,” Adrian said, holding up the gun. “Your barrister could have used that to reduce your sentence, you old fool.”

Adrian had known Trumbull would pull the shotgun’s trigger, but the Russian revolver was just as lethal.

Lord Trumbull would probably have died in jail for committing three murders. He’d fought for his family honor but would have paid a heavy price for winning that fight. And the real tragedies here were the deaths of Melody Simons and Stephen Trumbull, two people who could have turned their lives around if family honor hadn’t played such an oppressive role in their lives.

## Note from Steve

You have just finished another of my short fiction collections available as a free PDF download. Thank you for reading these stories. I hope you have enjoyed them. Because this collection is free, I'm not asking you to review it, but, if you like, use the contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>, to let me know what you think about it and whether you found it entertaining. Also, feel free to copy and pass this course around to your family and friends.

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Sing a Zamba Galactica  
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Rogue Planet\*\*\*

\*\*\*Bridge books between series, the last novel provides a bridge to the Dr. Carlos stories found in several collections (see below) and A. B. Carolan's third sci-fi mystery for young adults.

The following series are independent from our other series...

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The Last Humans  
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*“Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries”*

Muddlin' Through  
Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By  
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## About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the US and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. 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. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> or follow him on Twitter, where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.