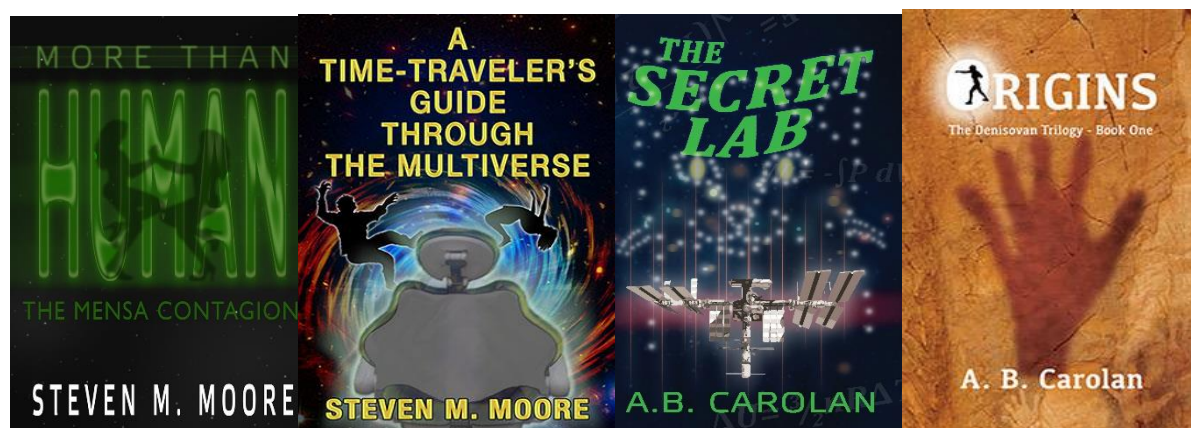




## THIS BEE CAN REALLY STING

Steven M. Moore



Around the World and to the  
Stars!

# **This Bee Can Really Sting!**

**One Detective,  
Three 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 short fiction and novels. (Two published series of novels, "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" and "Inspector Steve Morgan," 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 free PDF sequels also available as downloads.)

Here in these pages, I would like to introduce you to Bee Berkeley, a British Detective Inspector who's newly arrived at a nick aka police substation upriver from the Big Smoke aka London, England. Like all my detectives, from the Americans Chen and Castilblanco to the British Steve Morgan, she has some unique qualities. I hope her adventures contained in this little collection will entertain you.

Note: This free PDF has a new cover that highlights published novels in my oeuvre, mostly the first novels leading off my many series, including those under my pen name A. B. Carolan that I use for my YA sci-fi mysteries. In addition, the stories in this collection have never been previously available, 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 not available elsewhere. A complete list of my published novels and other 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 that this Bee can really sting!

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.

## A New Nick

Max saw the cricket bat's shadow just before the scrote attacked. That was enough warning. He spun and kicked out, his foot landing in the thug's crotch. That enraged his attacker even more. He swung the bat, but Max's head was no longer within its arc. Max was in a crouch at the man's side and punched him in the ribs. A left-legged kick then broke a kneecap, putting the thug on the floor. Another kick after the wanker fell to the floor sent the bat flying out of the thug's hands. Max then slapped handcuffs on his assailant.

After sitting down next to his prisoner and catching his breath, Max intoned the usual caution, ending with, "And we now wait for backup." He took out his mobile.

The scrote's only comment was a weak groan, evidence for pain in several spots of his body.

While Max waited for someone to arrive, he wondered how much trouble he might be in. One, it wasn't clear that the man in handcuffs would reveal who his accomplices were, if any, or who were the brains behind the jewelry store heists. *Certainly not this stupid lout, in any case!* Two, he probably should have called for backup first. *But who knew that a simple shadowing of a suspect could turn into a confrontation?* Three, Grumpy Gladys, his station's DCI wouldn't be pleased that he wasn't present to welcome the new DI. *Of course, the attack made that impossible, but the DCI might not welcome my excuse because of reasons one and two.*

An impartial observer might have wondered how a five-eight detective sergeant could take down a six-three mountain of muscle who obviously had bulked up with steroids. Max's boyish face and overall youthful look accented by his long, curly hair and tanned skin, perhaps the physique of a prep footballer but no obvious match for the man groaning in handcuffs, would certainly add to that wonder. Max's dojo wouldn't be at all surprised, though.

After the PCs who arrived carted off the scrote to a cell at the station and his own arrival there, the duty sergeant at the station's entrance eyed the young officer's disheveled state from his high perch. "You're late, lad, but apparently not overly worried about first impressions your new DI might 'ave 'bout you."

"Stuff it, Eddie!" Max said. "Mitigating circumstances, I'll have you know, old man."

Eddie smiled. Like Max, he'd started as a PC; unlike Max, the constable had only risen to PS and hadn't made detective or even taken the exams. "Her meet-and-greet's over with, so it's on you to make excuses with her, not me. Fair warning of possible troubled waters ahead: She doesn't seem like someone who tolerates sloppy policework...or sloppy detectives, to be honest."

Max frowned. "She? Her? DI Berkeley's a woman?"

"Aye, now you have both DCI Harkness and DI Berkeley to contend with, lad. That would never have happened in my prime time. Women were lucky to be considered reliable witnesses here. Most of them coming through this door were just kerb-crawlers. Shouldn't happen now either, but I can't do anything about it."

Max ignored Eddie's misogynistic comments, gave a curt nod, and ran up the stairs to the CID area. He thought that Eddie might have a point beyond his obvious misogyny, but he didn't have time to debate it in his mind. Times had changed. He promised himself to keep an open mind. *Let the feminine side of your brain rule your tongue, Max!*

He calmed himself as he walked towards the new DI's office.

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DI Bee Berkeley had just finished the meet-and-greet with her new team and retreated to her office just beyond Gladys Harkness's when there was a knock on her door jamb. She spun around in her office chair away from her computer, smiled, and told the disheveled young man standing there and looking embarrassed to come in and sit down.

"Sorry I'm a bit late, ma'am. I plead extenuating circumstances."

"DS Max Bloomfield, I presume." She stood, and they shook hands. She gestured for him to return to the chair. "Karen said you were on a case. Early riser, are you?"

DS Karen Strong was Bee's other sergeant. She'd been at the meet-and-greet and seemed to be a level-headed member of Bee's new team. She also seemed to be a bit older and emotionally more mature than Max if first impressions counted, a policeman who looked like he should still be in school.

He shifted uneasily in the old chair. "More like voluntary night duty that was extended, ma'am. I was shadowing a suspect who decided to attack me by surprise."

"Okay, Sergeant. Please rewind and restart: I'm Bee, not DI Berkeley, and definitely not Belinda. You're Max, not DS Bloomfield. Only among ourselves here at our home nick, of course. We should be a bit more formal out in public but not here at the station." He nodded; she smiled again. "Considering your sorry state, I'd already concluded that your shadowing became more of a strenuous activity, if not dangerous. I'm a detective, after all. Who won?"

"Like I said, the wanker attacked me, m—Bee. Custodial sergeant's got his papers in order, out of his cell, and installed in an interrogation room by now, and he's probably arranging for a duty solicitor to make an appearance."

"Charges?"

"For now, only attempted assault and battery of a police officer. That would be me, of course. I'd be honored if you join me in questioning the bloke. He might be more talkative with someone of more authority."

"Or the reverse. What were you tailing him for?"

"Suspect in a jewelry store robbery. Smash and grab after beating up the jeweler and threatening to kill him. The stupid wanker cut himself on some display case shards, though, and his DNA was in the system. There's been a series of similar robberies, so now I want to hassle him to see if he'll admit to all of them and/or reveal his collaborators. He definitely had a driver to aid in his escapes, and he's far too stupid to have planned the robberies all by himself."

"Sounds like a plan, Max. I'll follow you into the interrogation room."

When she entered the room behind Max, Bee looked from the thug to Max and back.

He seemed to read her mind and whispered into her ear, "Plonker doesn't know martial arts, Inspector, only brute force. Thought he could take me with a cricket bat, but he got the worse in the altercation."

The prat looked like he could maybe be twice the sergeant's size if one considered all the bulging muscles. She smiled and took a seat beside Max, nodding to him to begin the interrogation.

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Max turned on the recording system, cautioned the prisoner again, gave a brief nod to the duty solicitor, and began his spiel. He presented the forensics evidence they had against the prisoner that would be given to the Crown Prosecution Service prior to the trial. He then began questioning the scrote about his accomplices.

Donnie Billings at first only glared at him or said "no comment" in response to Max's questions. The sergeant then informed Billings how the CPS would give him a stiff sentence

because they would hold him completely responsible for all the robberies; he also reminded Billings again how the CPS might look more favorably upon him if he revealed who his accomplices were.

The duty solicitor wanted a private conference with the prisoner. Max took advantage of that to introduce Bee to the station's canteen.

"Will she tell Billings to make a deal?" Bee said, watching Max devour a bacon roll in a few gulps and washing it down with strong tea.

"Breakfast, Bee," he said, noting her frowning at his culinary habits. "And we don't make deals, but she knows we'll put in some favorable words for her client if he reveals his accomplices. He's certainly not the brains behind the robberies, who's probably some gang boss Donnie might not even know, but at least we might nick his driver. He'd be even lower in the pecking order than Billings, of course." Max wiped ketchup off his chin and saw her disgusted look again. "Twenty-four hours without eating, Bee. Please understand. I was peckish. I must remember to thank that solicitor for giving me that break."

"She's old enough to be your mother, so maybe that was her motivation. I could have taken over for you, you know."

"You don't know the details of the case. Wouldn't be fair to expect you to do that."

"And I would have expected you to call for backup to avoid getting attacked. You're lucky the pillock wasn't armed."

"Fight or flee. That's always the question. If he'd had a gun, I'd run. If he'd had a knife, maybe, maybe not. But all he had was a cricket bat."

"Where'd you learn your martial arts?"

He smiled. "Royal Marines originally. They train you well if you're willing to learn. I've continued to hone my skills after leaving the service as well."

"I see."

Upon their return to the interrogation room, they found that the solicitor had convinced her charge to reveal both the driver and the boss who'd taken his percentage as well. They could nick the former but not the latter. The boss was a gangland dweller who lived permanently in obscurity and paid people well to do his dirty work—well-known but not easy to nick, no matter what they had on him. Someday....

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"Good work in there," Bee said as she and Max walked back to the CID's open-plan area. Her office was adjacent to that, just past the DCI's.

"Definitely worth a few bruises," Max said with a smile.

"But not worth a concussion produced by a cricket bat. You're going to have to control yourself a bit more, Sergeant Bloomfield. There are wankers who know a bit of martial arts too. Right-wing domestic terrorists who are also ex-military, for example."

"I'm ready for them."

"Maybe, but you're not a terrorist who wouldn't assign any value to an adversary's life." Her mobile rang, and she raised a finger. "Sermon postponed and to be continued." She connected and listened, nodded, and rang off. "You're driving, Max. We've got a body."

"A murder?"

"To be determined." She gave him an address. "Do you know where that is?"

"On the outskirts of Bridgeton. I'll key it into the pool car's GPS."

Max still had the car he'd used in his pursuit of the jewel thief Billings.

"How fast are these EVs?" she said, sliding into the passenger seat beside him.

“Fast enough but short range. They’re generally good even for a chase unless you want to take a side trip to Scotland.” He laughed. “Buckle up, Bee. We’ll be there in a flash.”

She gave up trying to read text messages, mostly well-wishes from colleagues in London she’d valued as friends, some of them even old colleagues from the Met. They’d just make her feel gloomy or nostalgic, so she paid more attention to anticipating the turns and passes around startled motorists as he sometimes hit the blues and twos of the little car to clear the way. No one would or could drive like he did in the Big Smoke; the traffic would rarely let any motorist get anywhere fast, even a police car with blues and twos.

“Looks like your fast driving paid off,” Bee said, exiting the car and following Max after they arrived at their destination, a park in a relatively new housing estate. “We arrived before anyone else.”

She meant constables, SOCOs, and the pathologist and his minions, the first required to control the crime scene, the second for forensics, and the third for examining the victim at the scene and preparing him to be taken to the morgue. Those would be basically the same procedures as in London, standard police praxis even in Scotland and Wales.

“That won’t do the victim any good,” Max said.

They both saw the elderly woman sitting on the park bench after spotting the man’s body in the swing. Bee remembered the woman’s name from her brief conversation with the station’s duty sergeant who’d called Bee.

“Mrs. Chambers?” Bee said as she approached.

The woman twitched, turned off her mobile and put it into her purse, and glanced up at them. Both Bee and Max showed their warrant cards.

“Inspector Berkeley and Sergeant Bloomfield, Bridgeton Constabulary. You were the one who called our station, right?”

“’Twas me, indeed. Sorry, officers. I was expecting a longer wait, so I was catching a BBC interview of Harry Styles. I can see why all the young teenage girls idolize him.” She paused a moment to gather her thoughts. “Of course, you don’t care ‘bout that. I touched nothing, Inspector, to preserve your crime scene. Had to plop down here, though. Quite a shock for me and my pooch.”

Her little dog looked up at them and growled a greeting. He was on a leash, so Bee ignored it.

“Was the man in the swing when you arrived?”

“Aye. Knew he was dead, I dare say. Looked pale and lifeless like my Arthur had. He, Arthur that is, died in his favorite chair, he did. Swing’s not as comfortable, I suppose.”

Max had moved nearer the corpse and turned on his torch. He needed it because the light was already starting to fade. “Nasty needle mark in his neck, Inspector. Maybe he OD’d?”

“Any syringe?”

“None that I can see.”

“Then maybe not his doing.”

“Good Lord,” said Mrs. Chambers. “Are you saying someone murdered that poor man?”

“I’m not saying anything definite yet. Even an OD case could be a suicide or a murder. We must wait for the pathologist and forensics team.”

She brightened. “Oh, my goodness.” She looked up at the dark sky. “Arthur, your Maude is a witness in a murder mystery. Just call me Miss Marple!”

Bee smiled. “Do you live nearby, Maude?”

“Same neighborhood, just the next street over. I take Charlie out for a walk three times each day.” The dog barked upon hearing its name. “The impatient little scamp’s probably wanting to get on with it. He’s not done his business yet with all the excitement.”

Bee pulled out two of her cards and a biro. “Could you write your address and phone number on the back of one for me? We’ll get back to you tomorrow. If not us, then someone from my team. I don’t want to keep you any longer, Maude, but please call me using the number on the other card if you think of anything that might help us in our investigation.”

“Don’t I get a FLO? A nice young man like your sergeant maybe to accompany me?”

“A Family Liaison Officer is usually offered only in the case that you’re part of the victim’s family. You aren’t related to the victim, are you?”

“Heavens no. Never saw him before. I have no idea why he’s here in this neighborhood, let alone sitting in a swing in our park. Please keep me informed, Inspector. I’d like to see how my real-life murder mystery plays out.”

Bee smiled again. “I assume the media will keep you well-informed, but I’ll try to satisfy your curiosity. Just stay calm, please. I don’t think you or any of your neighbors are in danger.”

That didn’t head off the expected question. “Do you think he was placed there in the swing as a warning to someone?”

*I was asking myself that*, Bee thought. “Good question, among so many others we’ll have to deal with. Would you like my sergeant to walk you and your dog home?”

“That would be nice, Inspector. He’s a right handsome fellow. I suppose he can’t stay and have some tea?”

“I’ll ask him to do that then. I must wait for our crime scene personnel. And no to the tea, please. I’ll need him back here as soon as possible.”

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While Max accompanied Maude and Charlie to their home, Bee continued to walk around the small neighborhood park, looking for any obvious evidence. New construction now seemed to favor these comfy enclaves that estate agents loved—schoolyards and parks attracted city dwellers who wanted more space and fresh air for their broods, but they wanted it tidily organized. While some city folk would still make the long commute into the city, remote work and industry moving upriver shielded many in the London conurbation from the Big Smoke’s dense population and heavy and hectic traffic. She had asked for her parallel transfer mostly for another reason, though: She had no reason to continue working in the Met when her lawyer-husband had passed on.

She fully expected the pathologist and SOCOs to arrive at any moment, so she resisted the temptation to study the corpse in the swing more closely. Being new in her position, it wasn’t a good idea to start out on the wrong foot with them. She’d played nice with Max for the same reason, even though what he’d done to nick the jewel thief had been a bad decision.

Her strides were tentative yet purposeful. For her age, Bee was in good shape, although she knew she needed to dedicate more time to exercise. Jogging and swimming required showers and changes afterward, though, so a lot of her exercise time now was dedicated to walking. There was nothing wrong with her eyes, though, as they scanned the park grounds, mostly away from the swing set.

By one bench, at the far side of the park from where Maude had sat, there was some litter, mostly fag butts and condoms. That meant there were some older kids around at night. Overall, the park was fairly clean, though, with the swing set and seesaw indicating young children also visited it, mostly under the watchful eye of mothers or nannies. *Or maybe*

*househusbands?* Times were changing. Sometimes both father and mother would even be working at home these days, going into the city only for the occasional business meeting.

She was now increasing the size of her grid to the opposite side of the park but catty-corner to the teenagers' bench and near some large boulders that its planners might have left in place either for esthetic reasons, or for scrambling, rock-climbing tots to injure themselves on, although she suspected that the developers just hadn't wanted to spend the money to remove them. Ages ago those stones might have been at the edge of the Thames or even in its waters; its course had changed a bit many times over the eons. Now it was about three miles away, a dark, wide ribbon one might be able to see by standing atop the highest boulder.

Across the way, a hedge bordered the edge of the boundary road. She was thinking that it was a good place for a pervert to hide behind if he wanted to watch little tots at play. She'd never been assigned to a vice squad at the Met and was thankful for that. She wouldn't have been able to keep an open mind.

She was lucky the stones were there. She saw the flash just before a bullet whizzed past her head. She ran in a crouch behind the largest rock and felt a sting in her neck when another bullet smacked into it. She pulled out her mobile and made four quick calls.

The first was to the pathologist; the second to the SOCOs; the third, though she hesitated, was a text she sent to Max; and the fourth a call to the station's ARU. The first three calls were warnings about what was going on, especially to Max after hearing about his rash behavior when he nicked the jewel thief. The fourth was because her attacker obviously had a gun. *A rifle*, she thought. *Maybe even a sniper's rifle? Am I a target just because I'm a policewoman? Or am I one because I was Bee Berkeley, Metropolitan Police Detective Inspector?*

There was one more shot and then a long silence. *Has the assailant left? Or is he waiting for me to reappear, believing I think he's left?*

Her mobile's ringtone interrupted her thoughts.

"Are you okay, Bee?" Max said. She said yes even as she swiped at the wet, red blood on her neck. "I've talked to Carlos. He'll be arriving there at the park with his AROs *tout de suite*. The pathologist and SOCOs will wait here with me at Mrs. Chambers's place. Maude is enjoying all the excitement; Charlie, not so much."

Bee hadn't yet met any of the Armed Response Officers, their leader, Carlos Lobo-Guerrero included. "I don't think the shooter is far from the pool vehicle if he's still around. The shots seemed to come from that shrubbery just beside it. I told whoever answered that."

"I'm going to meet the ARV now on the street where we entered that neighborhood. Hold on and stay safe."

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It became a bit embarrassing for Bee. When the AROs arrived, they poured out of their van and spread out, rifles ready for action.

Max was talking to Bee when Carlos approached them. The ARU leader was all business, but there was no swagger. He eyed Bee with concern. "SOCOs have found three shell casings where you indicated, Inspector."

"Bee, just Bee, Carlos. I counted three shots, so that matches."

"Did a bullet nick you?" Carlos reached out and touched the drying blood on her neck, his fingers moving around the small wound, basically just a nasty scratch. They produced a sensation that Bee hadn't felt in a long time. "We've got a medic with us. He should take a look at that."

"It's almost stopped bleeding, so there's no hurry. Does the pathologist have anything to tell us about the victim yet?"

Carlos flashed a smile. "Said like a true detective. You'll have to ask her, but she doesn't like to be rushed. I'd let Doc Gwen and the SOCOs do their jobs. I'll stick around just in case, but I'll send the rest of my fellas home."

"Sorry for the false alarm, Carlos," Bee said. "I overreacted. I think the shooter figured someone armed might be on their way, so he scarpered. He could have even seen me calling."

"If you think Gladys might be worried about costs, I can speak to her. Most of the time, she's reasonable."

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It wasn't long before Bee decided that she and Max couldn't do much more at the crime scene. Gwendolyn Harris had agreed that a drugs overdose was probably the cause of death, but she wouldn't commit to that COD until she had the corpse from the swing in her morgue's lab. Phil Martin, the head SOCO, was finishing up too; they had another call. *Who would have thought the burbs would be so busy?* Bee asked herself, taking it all in.

Bee's team would have to wait for both reports. She wasn't looking forward to Doc Gwen's post-mortem exam; she'd have to attend to make a good show, though, considering it was her first day on the job.

She left Max and Karen at the station to set up a board to be used in the next morning's briefing. She hadn't had time to arrange her office to her liking yet, so she worked on that, leaving the few boxes for later except for things that could go in her desk or on top.

She sensed the man's big frame blocking her office's doorway even before she looked up to see Carlos.

"Time to go home, Bee," he said. "You'll have a lot more information available tomorrow to use in your briefing."

She sighed. "I suppose. You go home too. It's late."

"Need a lift? I saw that your parking space is empty."

"My old motor is in a car park near my boarding house. It's only a short walk from here."

"Considering what just occurred, let me drive you. It's past ten."

It was comforting to ride along with Carlos. She felt protected, a pleasant but strange new sensation for her. Ever since the shots at the park, she'd become very sensitive about how dangerous her job was. She'd put on a good face all her time at the Met, but her husband had seen right through the charade and was often just as protective as Carlos seemed to be. She thought she'd left at least some of that behind in London. She hadn't expected to be shot on her first day at her new posting!

"Your new beau looks like Eric Estrada," Mrs. Murphy said as she entered the boarding house and passed its small sitting room. The woman was watching something on the telly—actually, more listening than watching because she was knitting.

Bee had to dig into memories a moment as she wondered who that might be but then smiled. She was sure that Madelaine Murphy looked out for her younger female clients and might suspect the handsome immigrant from the British Virgin Islands was chatting her up. When Bee had checked in, Mrs. Murphy had reminded her of her own mother if she ignored Madelaine's Irish brogue. Her mother had thought every strange man, especially Latin types, was out to deflower her daughters.

"He's a gentle giant," Bee said, "but a tough *hombre* as well. And you shouldn't think anything is going on. I'm beyond needing a man in my life."

"Maybe too soon for that? But, at your age, it would be more about future companionship after you retire." She pointed at the bandage. "If you survive that long."

"A rock splinter, Mrs. Murphy. I didn't even need stitches. Have a good evening. I'm a bit too knackered to join you."

"Of course. I'll see you at breakfast, lass."

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The next morning, Bee avoided the full English and opted for a simple rasher scramble with toast and coffee. The coffee did some of the job of alleviating persistent weariness, but she was still happy that Carlos had offered to pick her up so she wouldn't have to walk. The gray sky was threatening rain, so she'd probably get just as wet walking to her vehicle that she'd left in a car park a block away. With Carlos's ride, she could thumb her nose at the menacing weather front.

Carlos was waiting for her. Bee got into his car but decided to test his intentions. "I appreciate your concern, big fellow, but really, I can use the exercise. It's a short walk to our station. In better weather, I should do it."

"Through a few questionable neighborhood streets where an assassin could easily hide?"

*Okay. Still the same excuse.* She thought a moment. "Then let's make it more of a ride. Before going to the station, I'd like to go back to the crime scene and visit our witness again, unless you have pressing business elsewhere."

He smiled. "Just your briefing at ten. Whatever else I have going on there, and let me assure you it's nothing beyond writing up my formal report for yesterday so Gladys can keep the accountants happy, I'd much rather give our lovely new inspector some protection." He patted his left lapel where there was a slight bulge. "I always carry my Glock even if I don't have my rifle. Just call me Rambo."

*Eric Estrada? Rambo?* She'd be working with people familiar with violence and desiring to curb it. Carlos must be an ex-soldier like Max. She'd never favored the militarization of the police, but blokes with that background came in handy sometimes—more so as the years passed. It had become a dangerous world in the twenty-first century, and the scrotes were often better armed than the police.

"I prefer to call you Carlos. I need to get more of a feel for the crime scene before our meeting. With the bullets flying yesterday, I didn't see enough details with my own eyes. Remember, I'm new to this area."

"Understood," he said as he swung away from the curb into the road and then made a U-turn. "In a quieter time, I can volunteer to take you around to see some local sites. This area differs from London a lot. Not quite as rural as farther upriver, but a lot more pleasant than the Big Smoke."

*Intentions clearer now. And why not, Bee? It's been three years!* "I'd like that, Carlos. And maybe you can help me find a place to live that's a bit more permanent than Mrs. Murphy's boarding house, although she's a jewel."

"That she is. I stayed there for a while myself until I found a place. I know a good estate agent who specializes in leasing, not sales, by the way. She's a jewel too."

Bee's interest waned. "Your wife? Or girlfriend?"

He laughed. "No. She's Max's older sister. Charming lady who must have a lot of patience to put up with him. He's very intense."

*That's a good description of Max.* "So, you aren't married?"

"Getting a bit personal, aren't you? Why aren't you?"

"I'm a widow."

"Oh. Sorry. I'm divorced. We're still friends, my ex and I, but she got tired of waiting for me when I was fighting overseas. That happens to a lot of soldiers. The PM and King Charlie can ruin your life in many ways, not just with taxes."

"Her loss, I imagine."

"Thanks for saying that, but she's got what she wanted—a husband and two kids now. No hard feelings on my part, Inspector. I'm happy she's happy. Going overseas changed me a lot. I couldn't adjust here for a while."

"PTSD?" He shook his head in the negative. "By the way, it's Bee, just Bee." She decided to end that painful conversation about loneliness and war-weariness. "So, what's special to see around here?"

They decided to table his interesting description of tourist sites and things to do when they arrived at the park. They both got out and began to walk around, Bee seeing more of the park and neighborhood in the bright sunshine after the air had been cleansed by the cloudburst. There was no sign of what had gone on the day before. When she passed the boulders, she shuddered. *Too close, Bee, so very close!*

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"That bloke across the way is watching us, Bee," Carlos said.

She looked at the opposite edge of the park over by the teenagers' bench and spotted the man who'd shaded his eyes to study their movements. He saw that they were looking at him, so he turned, hopped into his car, and sped off.

"BMW. I only got a partial on the plates because he was parked at the curb." He gave her the partial number he'd seen on a slip of paper, which agreed with her memory. "Do you think he might be the victim's killer and my shooter?"

"He was definitely interested in what we were doing. I don't think he was just admiring a lovely lady and envying me for being with you."

She laughed. "He could be admiring your body if he was gay, but thanks for the compliment. I did a bit of a lie-in this morning, so my hairstyle can only be called casual at best." She put her mobile back into her purse. "I wasn't quick enough to get a photo, not that it would show much detail from this far away."

"It's possible that someone is watching this park now after yesterday. You might want to get one or two PCs here in case that bloke returns. At least during the day."

"Let's continue our walk-around. I want to take a look behind the shrubs. I doubt that the SOCOs missed anything, but you never know. I want to see what kind of line-of-sight the sniper had too."

She was using her finger to point towards the rocks to test various lines of sight when Carlos said, "Footprint under this bush here, Bee."

She came over to him. "I'll get a SOCO to come back. We can get an impression of that. A small boot. Our watcher was a small man. Not a coincidence maybe." She took aim with her finger. "The shooter was standing among the shrubbery. It has some sharp thorns, so he must have had some protective clothing."

"Army fatigues maybe? Or Royal Marine garb? Only appropriate in the Mideast during winter, so maybe a bush outfit."

"If ex-military, he doesn't have to be from ours. The French had people in Africa, for example."

"Aye. During the colonial period, European soldiers were everywhere."

“Let me call Gwen so she can get a SOCO here. We’ll then pay Mrs. Chambers another visit. I wonder if she’ll now remember a black BMW being parked here yesterday.”

Maude Chambers insisted on offering them midmorning tea and biscuits. “My, you are a handsome lad,” she told Carlos, making him blush as she served as mother for the tea service. “My husband Arthur was a gentle giant as well. So now, what brings you both to my humble abode?”

Bee swallowed her bit of biscuit before answering, chasing it down with a sip of the excellent tea prepared just as she liked it. “There was someone at the park spying on us.” She described the driver and the car. “Any chance that description jiggles any of your memories from yesterday?”

“Now that you mention it, that stranger was there. He was using his mobile like I was. I don’t think he was just one of my nosy neighbors either. But I was occupied asking you folks to come, and Charlie paid him no attention. He usually barks at nearby strangers, but maybe he was far enough away not to be threatening for my pooch.”

“No BMW owners in your development then?” Carlos said.

“Everyone who has motors here owns modest ones. Most people here are young couples just starting out with a house, because they’re all modest homes as well. There’s a good bus service into town, though, one of the features of the development. I myself bought here because of that. My husband took care of his car, but when he passed on, I didn’t want the bother.”

They went over a few other things—newcomers to the neighborhood, how often patrol cars passed through, bus schedules, taxi services, and so forth. Bee, who had an excellent memory, took note of some possibilities about how the shooter might have made his escape.

It had been a pleasant forty-five minutes spent with Maude, but Bee needed to prepare a briefing.

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Bee heard the ping from her mobile as they pulled into the station’s car park. “The DCI wants to see me,” she told Carlos. “Does she micromanage?”

“Not too much, and mostly up, not down. She probably just wants an update on the case.”

“I’ll delay the meeting with my whole team to ten-thirty. Okay with you?”

“I guess I’m involved indirectly. And that way you’ll have some time to chat with Gladys and get sorted. And don’t worry about her. She might have heard about you being shot at and wounded and is worried.”

“I hope you’re right. I can’t think of any gaffe on my part except not going to that park with your ARU to begin with. I’ve never done that in my long career, though, not even in the Big Smoke where more danger supposedly lurks for coppers.”

“Gun control laws are very strict in England, so people can become complacent. That’s why ARUs are needed. Even in the US, where gun laws are lax, SWATs keep busy. And the scrotes in either country can easily find enough ways to kill someone without guns.”

“Have you been to America?”

“Never. Knew a lot of Yanks overseas, though. Told me they even sell military-style weapons in the US. I didn’t believe them at first, but with all the mass shootings there, seems like my Yank colleagues weren’t taking the piss. And, speaking of ARUs, I’d better report for duty. See you at the meeting.”

Carlos continued upstairs to the third floor where the SOCOs and AROs hung out. On her way through, Bee told Karen to put finishing touches on organizing the incident room and prep

for the meeting and then headed for the DCI's office that was located just before hers off the CID's open-plan area.

"Have a seat, Bee. Are you okay?" Gladys Harkness asked.

She laughed and pointed to the bandage on her neck. "Everyone has overreacted to my being nicked by rock shrapnel here. It's nothing."

"Being shot at is more than nothing and most unusual around here. But tell me about your progress on the case."

"Maybe two cases. It's likely someone murdered a bloke and left him in a swing at a small neighborhood park. That someone or some other someone took three shots at me. Carlos and I revisited the park this morning and spotted a loiterer who sped off in a black BMW. The woman who found the victim yesterday in the swing said she'd also seen that bloke and his car too the day she found the victim. So, we possibly have a third person involved."

"Or just one returning to the scene of the crime to shoot at you yesterday and snoop this morning. Any luck identifying the victim?"

"Not yet. Preliminary information indicates he might have died from an OD of drugs. That's suicide or murder, but my shooter might be evidence for the latter."

"Any chance we have the case of your old enemies from London who's followed you here?"

"I started checking to see if anyone I'd put in prison has been recently released last night but didn't have time to finish that task. I don't know how that could be connected to the victim, though. And how would they know that I would be SIO for the case? Or, even when I'd start to work here?"

"All good questions. I hate to turn Carlos into your bodyguard for the duration of the case, but do you think you need one?"

"I can't say definitely, but I doubt it. But let me finish the task I started last night. It might just give us a lead." Gladys nodded; Bee smiled. They were communicating well. *What a difference with the male-dominated Met*, she thought. "I'm meeting with my whole team at ten-thirty. You're welcome to attend. The others might have some more news about the case. They all seem very creative detectives."

"I must pass on that. I have an appointment with the Chief Super at eleven. We're discussing budget matters, so that will eat into lunchtime, if you pardon the pun. It's nauseating to watch him eat all sorts of unhealthy foods, by the way, so that will add to my torture. The one plus is that our appointment is at his country club. It overlooks the Thames, and I can usually sort a much healthier lunch than what he eats there."

Bee laughed. *Okay, the local police were still primarily a man's domain, but at least I have a buffer between me and misogyny.* "Even with that, I don't envy your meeting. I'll keep you informed."

"Please do. And let me know if you need any help when the media learns about this case. They can be such piranhas sometimes, always ready to bite and scream 'police incompetence.' Unfortunately, the Super's quite sensitive to that pressure, bless his grossly fat political soul."

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The morning's briefing and brain-storming session went as smoothly as possible. Bee started by posting three questions on the case board: Who is the victim, who killed him, and why? Who is the shooter, and is he the same man who killed the victim? Who is the owner of the BMW, and is he the same man as the first two?

She then reported on some generalities and specifics, the latter including the boot print that she and Carlos had discovered. The SOCOs only had preliminary results that obviously didn't include anything about the boot print, but they'd found no prints on the three shell casings. Karen reported on the pathologist's preliminary findings.

"Doc Gwen says the victim in the swing was given an overdose," Karen said, "but she needs to confirm which drug. She's guessing it's heroin or heroin with fentanyl. She also found a fast DNA match for our victim, Bee," Karen said, "to be confirmed by a more complete test."

Bee knew that the fast DNA test wasn't good enough for the CPS—it was basically the one used by ancestry websites—but the result represented a lead.

"His name's Walter Branson. He was arrested for securities fraud about five years ago but wasn't convicted because of a technicality. He was still working in the financial industry, matching up small companies here with investors from overseas, mostly China."

"China?" Bee thought about that. She could imagine that MI5 or the NCA would take over the case, especially if Gladys decided to save some of the station's budget, the first justified by the Chinese involvement and the second due to its charter to control organized crime...assuming the small companies were somehow associated with that. "Follow that lead. Max, you and the DCs should examine anything involving Mr. Branson over the last ten years. He obviously made enemies, at least one very lethal one."

"Or he knew something someone didn't want him to tell us," said one of the DCs.

"Whatever. And whoever murdered him had access to powerful drugs."

"Maybe a better way to die than a shot to the head," another DC said.

"Good point if you're referring to my shooter," Bee said. "I have two scrotes I put away, though, who might be responsible for that. I'll have to eliminate the possibility that the shooting was unrelated to the murder and motivated by revenge against me for perceived grievances I caused in my previous position. We also have the bloke in the black BMW. Any joy on that?"

"Just beginning the search," another DC said.

"Okay. I'm not one for socializing until we solve our first case together. Let me list some action items before we end this session."

That took hardly any time at all. Everyone left but Karen and Max. "My office, you two."

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They entered behind her, she gestured to two chairs, and everyone got comfortable. "It's clear that these cases are complex. Definitely not a careless but violent jewel thief." She smiled at Max. "And therefore they will be a challenge. I need a lot of help here, especially for the local crime scene. They tell me drugs here are as much a problem as in London. Is that correct?"

"Per capita, maybe even more so," Karen said. "The distributors and dealers started expanding into the greater London area years ago. People around here tend to be more affluent and are into their recreational highs, let's say. A bit more into designer drugs too. Are you thinking this is drugs-related?"

"I'm only thinking that Mr. Branson was murdered by someone who had easy access to hard drugs. That doesn't correlate well with using a sniper's rifle, though."

Max nodded. "Like you said, the two incidents might not be related. But how would a separate assassin know you'd be SIO?"

"He couldn't. Which might mean that the assassin, if one and not two, was pleased when he discovered I was the SIO. But why would they stick around? We need a process of elimination. Let's give priority to finding the BMW driver and either eliminate him from the investigation or squeeze him for information. The make and plate are good clues. Sort that. My

immediate job is to eliminate the scrotes who were just released from the king's boarding houses and might want some revenge against me. I might take Carlos along for that.” She winked at Max. “Considering I’m not an expert on martial arts, and he’s always packing.”

Karen eyed Max. “That’s what you should have done, Sergeant Bloomfield. You’re using up your nine lives far too fast.”

Bee would remember that comment because it implied Max had a reputation of being a loose cannon.

“Stuff it. I already received a tongue lashing from my partner. I made the decision that I could take the brute, and I was correct.”

“On the spur of the moment, I’m sure,” Bee said. “The next time you could be wrong. Follow protocol, Max.”

In London, she might have used the threat of demoting him to detective constable or patrol constable, but that might be too easy on the hothead for their area—both had more fixed hours and fewer responsibilities even compared to a DS. But she also suspected that Max liked being more enmeshed in the hunt for criminals, so that threat might be effective. She was reticent about doing anything more, though, because she was so new to the job. *Will my warning and the others’ peer-pressure be sufficient?*

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There were five ex-prisoners Bee had nicked that had been recently released, four men and one woman. She decided the woman wasn’t a possible candidate for the shooter—she wasn’t a local girl and her crime had been justified in Bee’s eye, if not by the law: She’d fought with her abusive husband, and he had gotten the worst of it. Bee decided she should look her up sometime to see how she was doing.

One of the men was known to have returned to Dundee where he’d grown up. He’d robbed a package store for a few quid to pay for a drugs habit and almost killed the storeowner. He’d entered rehab up north. Turned out a second man was dying in a hospice; liver cancer had caught up with him.

That left two locals for her and Carlos to visit. The first was a volunteer in a local NHS clinic; the second was an auto mechanic. Bee was beginning to think this was all a waste of time, but they paid the two a visit anyway.

The orderly accepted their offer of coffee from a nearby café in return for a chat. “Maybe I should consider this bullying or persecution?” he said, eyeing Bee over the brim of this mug. “I thought you would be out of my life forever, Inspector.”

She smiled. “That goes both ways, Darrel. And I would leave you alone except that a sniper tried to kill me. Even you should see that it’s natural for me to think an old acquaintance from the mean streets of the Big Smoke might be the shooter.”

“Some would call that paranoia.”

“I see you’re picking up some medical terminology in your new post.”

“Thanks to you, I’m basically a janitor. No one will hire an ex-prisoner for any decent job.”

“They would if that prisoner had any skills that are worthwhile. Yours were only beating and robbing old men and women.”

He shrugged. “Society has treated me badly since I was a wee one, Inspector. Most criminals aren’t born that way, but society forces them into criminal activity if they’re going to survive.”

Bee knew there was some truth to that, but a lot of kids started out as disadvantaged members of society and rose above it while others took what they considered the easier road.

"We're not concerned about your past or mine here," Bee said. "You were in the Army. Did you ever shoot a rifle?"

He laughed. "The Home Office records will show that my duties overseas were similar to what I'm doing now: Orderly in field hospitals."

"Orderly but sometimes nursing duties? Ever give a colleague an injection?"

"Nearest I got to that was getting rid of the used syringes. And I was never a drugs user myself in case that's your next question. Won't touch the junk. Me Mum died from an overdose."

Bee rose from the table and smiled at him. "I wish you luck, Darrel. Let me know if you want to get more training in caregiving. There are male nurses and physicians' assistants, and there are programs for people who want to do that. I have some contacts." She handed him one of her cards. "Think about it. I'd like to help if I can."

"That was a nice touch, Bee," Carlos said as he accompanied her to the pool car.

"An obligatory one. I often think that there but for the grace of God, I could be in that man's place."

He nodded. "I know what you mean."

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Craig was a different story. He wasn't swayed by a cup of coffee. He did a runner. Considering he had a bum leg and Carlos was fleet of foot for a big man, he was soon sitting in IR1 under a PC's watchful eye while Bee and Karen waited for the duty solicitor.

"Another waste of time maybe," Bee said to her sergeant, "but I think the stupid git is guilty of something."

Karen eyed the man on the other side of the one-way window. She wasn't keen on facing the angry man across the interrogation room's table. "With that face, he could play an orc in *The Lord of the Rings*."

"Yes. He's basically a hulking ogre. I didn't nick him; an ARU did that. Took three of them to get the cuffs on him. He seems to be clean after his release, though, so maybe he's a reformed orc. What's this solicitor like?"

"David's one of the reasonable ones. He's an estate attorney who's also a solicitor and does pro bono work. His big failing is his belief that everyone deserves legal representation."

"I can respect that more than the attitudes of some of our media representatives who specialize in finding fault with the police. How are the ones here?"

"Oh, we get some of that London crowd as well. You'll feel right at home."

Bee frowned. "I'm happy that Gladys is handling the first press conference then. Ah, here's our solicitor."

Karen introduced Bee to David Thorn, a small man with keen eyes and a sharp tongue. "You're new here, Inspector, so fair warning: You must follow protocol. I'll catch you for not doing that every time."

They entered the room that was as cold as the wanker's stare. "Craig, we'll give you five minutes with your duty solicitor here. There are no charges against you yet. We'll repeat the caution, but this is more to just ask you a few questions."

"I know what's going on. You're trying to fit me up for something to put me back in gaol."

She smiled at the use of the old word, although the Met's custody sergeants were sometimes called gaolers. *What is the bloke guilty of?*

"We're just asking for information, as I said. Do you need coffee or tea, Mr. Thorn?" She didn't think that not offering Craig refreshments was a breach of protocol. Nevertheless, Karen went to sort tea for David and coffee for Craig, so Bee took the opportunity to find Max. "Any joy for the BMW or its driver?"

"Five BMWs have plates containing that partial plate number. Surprisingly, they're all hire-cars from three different agencies, so we're checking on who leased them. Toffs coming in the train out of the Big Smoke like to cruise around in style, I'm guessing. Nothing so far on the driver."

"Keep at it. I think the car and its driver might play a key role in this drama."

She returned to IR1 where Karen was handing out refreshments. They all got sorted, Karen turned on the video recorder and cautioned Craig again, and the questioning began.

It was all for naught. Craig had the perfect alibi: He had been in another station's nick the night of the shooting.

"Sorry, Inspector," David said as the three watched the custodial sergeant lead Craig out of the building, once again a free man. "Looks like he did a runner because he understandably doesn't like jail and just had another night in a cell. You might see him in the future, but not for shooting at you."

She laughed. "Thanks for your honesty, counselor. We had to see whether some of my old acquaintances in London had anything to do with the shooting."

"I haven't been given much information about your case—I'll probably read about it in the press like other people—but it seems to be a complex one."

"Not something I needed in my first days here," she said with a sigh.

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Bee and Karen went to the brokerage to learn what Walter Branson did there. The gum-chewing receptionist's cleavage seemed out of place in that serious establishment. Bee raised an eyebrow at Karen who nodded with a smile—a plastic surgeon's knife had equipped her well with silicone implants, it would seem, and that meant that she wouldn't have to do much work there beyond looking pretty, filing her nails, and ushering clients into some broker's office.

Female investors would be turned off, so the brokerage must cater to rich males. *Wealthy Chinese?* Bee asked herself. She generally resisted stereotypes, but a lot of people thought Asians were smart capitalists and misogynists at the very least. She forced herself to keep an open mind.

"Mr. Dalton will see you now, officers. Please follow me."

Even if she were invisible and Bee had been blind, she could have followed the gum-popping sounds. And Bee thought either of those would be better because she was wondering if the woman had received a butt job as well. She felt sorry for the receptionist. She obviously believed that becoming an office decoration would assure her a steady job, no brains and little work required.

The receptionist held the office door open with its nameplate announcing its occupant was Bruce Dalton with some obscure acronymic titles following the man's name. Dalton's eyes followed the swinging hips and butt out of the office and then turned their attention on them, appraising the two coppers.

After handshakes—the broker's hand was a clammy and spongy one—he gestured to two chairs in front of his desk and sat down in his own.

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“What can I do for you ladies today?”

“We’re seeking information about Walter Branson, one of your employees, Mr. Dalton,” Bee said.

“Please call me Bruce. I feel we three are already on friendly terms. Welcome to our brokerage. Now, about Walter. He’s usually not here. He’s our traveling broker, you see. He covers most of the Thames Valley from London to Oxford. One week per month here, three on the road. I don’t envy him.”

“So, he visits clients where they live?”

“That, and he also holds financial seminars to advise people about what their investment options are, considering their financial situations and lifetime goals. We sell several products here, and he brings in a lot of business for us because most other brokerages don’t offer that service.”

“And your portfolios feature a lot of Chinese firms?” Karen said.

Bee wouldn’t have asked that so soon, but she was interested in the answer.

Bruce frowned. “You say China as if it were a swear word, Sergeant. While it’s true that we invest in a lot of foreign corporations as well as English ones, Chinese included, we’re a brokerage whose only interest is to make money for our investors. We’ve found that diversified portfolios do that best. Whether EU and Asian corporations, even US, successful companies make their investors rich, officers.”

“And your brokerage as well, I suppose,” Karen said.

Now Bee thought her sergeant was being a bit too confrontational.

Bruce shrugged. “That in a nutshell is our business model, yes. If our investors make money, so do we.”

“And is the reverse true?” said Bee with a smile.

Now he frowned. “We charge a minimum commission for every trade.”

“Which means you always make money even if your investors don’t, right?” Karen said.

Bee didn’t wait for Bruce to answer that. “Are you Mr. Branson’s boss?” she said.

“No. Walt is one of the partners in the firm. He came up with the idea for offsite work to bring in new investors. Seems to like all the travel. I wouldn’t like to spend all that time on the road. In a sense, we work as a team: He generates interested clients; and we take care of the boring details of handling their investments here, making the buys and sales. Even our onsite workers are split that way, although the connection with clients becomes more online or via phone. We move fast here. The market doesn’t favor slow decision-makers.”

“Understood. When did you talk to Walter last?”

“I’d have to check. His crew would know that answer and his whereabouts.”

“Maybe not. He’s currently in our morgue.”

“What!” Bruce dropped the expensive pen he’d been twirling, his face as pale as a ghost’s. “He-he’s dead?”

Bee let Karen summarize the part of the murder case directly involving Walter while she glanced around the office. It was utilitarian, not particularly posh, and windowless. She noted a red glow on the ceiling, its source seeming to come from the top shelf of a bookcase. *The broker is recording our visit!*

“I-I dare say we’ll cooperate fully in any way we can to help you find who did this,” Bruce said after Karen had finished her spiel.

“We’d appreciate that, Bruce,” Bee said. “Did Walter or anyone here own a BMW?”

"All the company cars are EVs, Inspector. We're an eco-friendly brokerage."

"How laudable." Bee made a mental note to find Walter's vehicle. "For now, that's all the questions we have." She handed her card to the broker. "Please call our main number if you have any information that might help our inquiries. I suspect you will be busy tending to those clients who expect a visit from Walter. You wouldn't happen to know if they're all satisfied with his services, do you?"

"There never have been any complaints. Why would there be? They make a lot of money."

"Even in this economy?"

"As I said, it's all about speedily reacting to market changes. Unless a client spent full time managing their own investments, they couldn't do any better, I assure you."

"Do you have any female clients?"

"That's a strange question. Of course, we do."

*Maybe they've never met your receptionist*, Bee thought. "Good day, sir. We'll keep in touch with any news, and please do the same."

"He's sleaze," said Karen as the two got in the pool car.

"And a liar," Bee said. "There are two BMWs in the car park. Neither has the same partial plate ID that we're looking for, though, and they're blue, not black. So much for eco-friendly."

"We should investigate this brokerage some more."

"Yes, Walter's clients in particular."

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A short time after pulling out of the brokerage's car park and returning to the main road that would take them back to the station, Bee said to Karen, "We're being followed."

Karen, the driver of the pool's EV, looked in her rearview mirror. "Black BMW. I don't think we have enough juice to lose it, Bee."

"On the contrary, let's see what they want," Bee said. She glanced at the GPS that was on for her benefit because she was learning the area's roads that Karen already knew so well. "Turn right at the next intersection." That took them down a narrow country lane that wove between drainage ditches bordering farm fields. After a few seconds, she added, "Now slow down and straddle the road to block it."

They got out and stood by the EV to await the BMW. It came around a bend. Its driver stopped to consider the situation. Bee took a photo of the BMW's plate with her mobile in case he attempted the turn-around that would be nearly impossible on the narrow road.

"He could ram us and push us out of the way," Karen said.

"Or try to back up three miles on a narrow lane. If he attempts to turn around, I'm betting he'd end up in one of the drainage ditches. He'll know his options aren't good. Let's see what he attempts."

The driver surprised them. He got out of the BMW and waved at them. "Well done, Inspector!" he called out.

He looked like the bloke that she and Carlos had seen at the park. The BMW's plate matched the partial number she had. *Maybe this part of the mystery will soon be solved?*

He began to walk towards them and offered a handshake when he arrived. "Rick Sanders, MI5, at your service."

*Apparently, he already knows who we are.* "Do you have any ID, Mr. Sanders. I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"Oh, we know you well enough from your days at the Yard, Inspector. What did you learn about Walter and his brokerage?"

After Bee and she had examined the agent's shield, Karen said, "Why is MI5 interested in our case?"

*My sergeant is a bit in-your-face, not that this agent doesn't deserve it. And he has little or no experience despite his cocky swagger!*

"We suspect there's a possible connection with Chinese and Russian business interests. More the former now, of course, after Putin's debacle in Ukraine ruined his economy."

"Industrial espionage?" Bee said.

"More about buying and controlling British corporations by proxy. Other assets as well. Questionable investments that raise many red flags at the Home Office."

"Was Walter Branson directly involved in that?"

"We were trying to find that out. But now he's dead."

"Yes, and we're trying to find out who killed him. Somebody also tried to kill me."

"I heard about that. Maybe more like a little warning because they thought you were one of my colleagues? You were careless, so I'm sure if they wanted you dead, you would be. Personally, I'm thinking Walter became a liability for them, so he was silenced."

"Permanently," Karen said. "Are you now going to tell us to butt out, Mr. Sanders?"

"Never crossed my mind, love. You ladies have a murder to solve, and believe me, Sergeant, your DI knows how to do that well. We, on the other hand, have more important concerns: National security worries, to be precise."

Bee had seen Karen cringe at the word love. *I don't blame you, sergeant!* "Just make sure those lofty concerns don't get in the way of our investigation," she said. "We'll turn our car so you can drive on. Somewhere down the lane there might be enough room to make a U-turn in your very large car." She smiled. "By the way, you should drive a less posh car. The BMW really attracts attention."

"My cover is being an estate agent who shows upscale properties to London's diaspora. Please don't blow it."

"If anyone believes that, they deserve an award for stupidity." Bee winked at Karen.

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"Well, that solves the mystery of the BMW," Karen said as they sped back along the lane back to the main highway that would take them to the station again.

Bee only nodded. She was musing over the recent events. Once in the station's car park, she chatted with Karen a bit.

"I have a theory," Bee said, "and it might go far to explain MI5's meddling."

Karen raised her eyebrows. "I thought you were going to go after me. I pushed back on that agent. His holier-than-thou attitude rubbed me the wrong way."

"Every policeman is critical of MI5 and NCA's involvement in local cases at least sometime in their career. You and Max must learn to bite your tongues, though, if only to let the prats hang themselves out to dry with their own words. But you'll like my theory." She patted the dash. "This EV is nice. Maybe I should replace my old car with one like it."

"And the theory?"

"I'm sandpapering its rough edges, so keep it to yourself for now. Agent Sanders is young and inexperienced, so he wasn't too careful. Or his training was cut short. New on the job and cocky as well. What if some nasty people made him as MI5 when he was tailing Walter and that's why they decided the broker was a liability?"

“And why not just eliminate the MI5 agent?”

“Because that would really focus MI5’s attention on them.”

“And what about trying to kill you?”

“What Rick said: They thought I was MI5 too, maybe even Rick’s boss.”

“That’s quite a theory, Bee.”

“I know. But you’ll have to admit it fits the facts.” Bee sighed. “Not that it matters much. For now, we’ll just ignore Rick Sanders. Our first priority is to find out what Walter was up to, and who had him doing it. There’s one thing that’s certain: It’s not just about Walter’s being a successful broker. We need to be watchful and wait for the Thames’s tide to go out to discover who’s swimming naked in its dirty waters in this case.”

“That must be a London copper’s adage. From Scotland Yard?”

“Hardly. My deceased hubby used it a lot. I think it originated with an American investor, or a version of it, someone named Warren Buffet. Some wide American river and probably not the Thames, though.”

“Do you miss him?”

She frowned. “If you’re lucky enough to find a soulmate, Karen, you will miss him if he leaves you too soon. All you can do is learn to live with the loss. Let’s go get the others focused on Mr. Branson and his brokerage. The answers lie there.”

“Will we tell them about who owns the BMW?”

“Some of what Rick said, yes, especially that he promised MI5 will stay out of our investigation. The whole team needs to know we’re holding him to that.”

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After briefly informing the team about the MI5 agent’s revelations (she avoided mentioning her theory), Bee itemized what had to be done.

“One, I want to know where Walter was during the forty-eight hours before his body was found. Two, who was he with recently? Three, what clients did he see on the road, including those taking interest in investing after his seminars. Four, who are his active clients in general, and are there any new ones worthy of our suspicions. Fifth, is there anything in his past that made him a target, relating to business or not. Or anyone who was an enemy or out for revenge for some perceived wrong?”

“Maybe he had an affair with someone’s wife?” a DC suggested.

“Yes, anything like that. His death could have nothing to do with who his clients are. There can be many motives for murder.”

“Don’t you want to know who shot at you?” Max said.

“I’m certain that has something to do with Walter. Don’t worry about me. Focus on him. And if anyone feels uneasy while doing it, get an ARO to give you company. We don’t need any more victims, so don’t be a hero. That includes you.” She stared at Max for a moment, and he studied his shoes. She continued. “Somehow, some way, Walter ended up in that park. That has to be explained. Right now, we’re just gathering all the information we can, but real soon we’ll have to take those puzzling pieces and put them together to get a complete picture. Karen and Max, please get people sorted. We don’t want duplicate efforts, but we don’t want to miss anything either. Before anyone asks, I’m off now to tell our DCI that my past at the Yard has nothing to do with this case. At least we now know that.” *And that MI5 agent will be wanting to see what we find, I bet!*

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Bee found Gladys on the phone, so she waited just outside the DCI's door. After hanging up, Gladys pointed to a chair in front of her desk.

"The Super wants a press conference. Do you have anything I can use?"

"We have the ID of the victim; and we've excluded the BMW driver from consideration, so he won't need mention. We're learning more about the victim. He was a traveling broker who also gave lectures about managing one's investments."

"I need information like that. I'm a novice about investing. Tell me about the BMW driver."

"You won't be pleased. He's an MI5 agent">

Gladys frowned and sighed. "Just what we need! Why is MI5 interested in this case?"

"Let's just say that they suspect that Walter was a bit too friendly with Chinese investors and Chinese companies wanting to invest here."

"Unless some Chinese spy or assassin killed Branson, we're not interested in MI5's paranoid musings about national security. Did this agent know who shot at you?"

"No, but I've determined no one I nicked in London who's recently been released could have been the shooter."

"That's good and bad. Good, because someone you arrested could be persistent about revenge; bad, because we need to know who that shooter was, Bee. Especially is he's not connected in any way to Branson and is just after you."

"The MI5 agent and I both wondered if the shooter thought I was another MI5 agent."

Gladys smiled and thought a moment. "That's a possibility, I suppose. For now, I'd focus on finding Walter's killer. That will probably lead to your shooter. He could be one and the same person."

"I'm convinced that park scene was staged, and Walter was killed elsewhere, even though Gwen can't prove that."

Gladys now nodded. "Yes, I can't imagine a broker going to a park to enjoy a swing. Still, he might have a client who lives nearby. Or someone else there he visits."

"We will find out who his clients were. The brokerage wasn't all that helpful. I suspect they only know about the ones he already has active, not any of his new prospects."

"Who might have turned up at one of his seminars. That's a lot of people."

"Any chance of getting a few more PCs to help out?"

"I'll speak to the Super. We're always shorthanded. Just do the best you can. That's all we can do."

"You'll brief the press?" Gladys nodded. "Do I need to be there?"

"I'd like that. You're new here, so I want them to waste some time finding out about your police past in London. That will keep them busy for a while."

Bee almost laughed at that, but she then frowned. "And that activity could lead to questions at the press conference if they've already done that."

"You'll have to meet and greet the jackals sometime, Bee. Might as well get it over with. They might even tread lightly because you're new."

"Or just the opposite."

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That mostly reasonable discussion with Gladys was followed by an unreasonable one with Rick Sanders. The agent was waiting for Bee in her office.

"I thought you spooks like to keep a low profile. First, you drive around in an expensive car that shouts feds or gangsters, and then you come here to my station. Our duty sergeant is a fine fellow but also a gossip, so everyone here now knows that my case has the MI5's interest."

"You're not very flexible, lady," Rick said. He then leered at her. "At least in your work life. No proof for the other meaning, of course."

Despite her attempts at control, Bee blushed, thinking of Carlos. "Get out, Mr. Sanders. You and your ilk aren't welcome here."

"Don't you want to know why I was willing to run the coppers' gantlet to talk to you?"

"To insult me?"

"To warn you. I talked to my bosses. Unless you're willing to cooperate and tell us everything you find out about Walter's killer or killers, they'll take over your case. Knowing your history, you wouldn't like that very much, I dare say."

"If you want to pass on threats from the Home Office, I can refer you to my DCI. She'll tell your bosses where they can put their threats, I'm sure. I frankly don't have time for you or MI5's threats. Now, get out!"

He stood and showed palms up to indicate submission. "Peace, Bee. I'll edit that message and pass it up the ladder. I can understand your feelings."

"My feelings echo those of most every copper at this station and most of Scotland Yard's as well, I can assure you."

He shook his head and walked out, but Bee knew that she hadn't seen the last of Agent Sanders.

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It took a few minutes for Bee's temper to ebb, but she then began to go over the facts of the case. *MI5's interest possibly amounts to a red herring*, she thought. *A distraction.* Walter Branson's murder could have nothing to do with foreign affairs. She decided that focusing on Walter and his business dealings was imperative, and that would probably lead to something entirely different from anything the Home Office or MI5 should be concerned about. She put them out of her mind and began to coldly analyze the facts to date. There weren't many, and that was both good and bad.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Max stood there, looking serious for once.

"We have a female visitor awaiting us in an interrogation room. She wants to chat with the SIO."

"What about?"

"She says she's a friend of Walter."

"I see. Don't take this the wrong way, but is Karen around? She'll talk more easily to two women."

"Karen's supervising the ANPR records search. I can take over that for a time. I'll tell her."

Bee met Karen outside the interrogation room. "I bet you needed a break," she said.

"The only thing we've found so far is the BMW, but we already knew all about that. And yes, my eyes needed a rest. There's a lot of video records to go through."

"So, let's meet Walter's friend."

The friend was a stunner. Karen's raised eyebrows showed that she had thoughts similar to Bee's. "Honey B. Goode?"

The woman, who had been pacing on her side of the table, nodded, and the three women shook hands and took chairs, the two detectives facing her. "I'm scared, officers. Whoever killed my Walter might come after me."

"What makes you think that?" Bee said. "How did you know Walter?" She had picked up on the "my" in "my Walter." *Lover? Mistress? Or just a female friend?*

"Um, let's just say we were intimate friends. I knew the relationship wouldn't go far—mine never do, because most men I meet are wankers—but Walter was caring and tender with me."

"Were you one of his investors?" Karen said.

Bee didn't begrudge her new sergeant the question. *Okay, we can get that out of the way. I know the answer.* But the one their visitor offered surprised Bee, and maybe Karen.

"We met that way. Honey B. Goode is my stage name. I'm an exotic dancer. And yes, I had some money to invest. I want a future for my child. My real name is Susie Chang. My grandparents and my father were refugees from Hong Kong. My mother's Irish." She sighed. "One thing led to another. I was lonely; so was Walter. But I think he got mixed up in something bad. He became very nervous the last month or so. His investment seminars suffered in quality."

"Do you know what was making Walter nervous?" Bee said.

"I believe he'd been approached by some unsavory characters. My boss, for example."

"And who is your boss?"

"Gao Chen. I serve drinks as well as dance in his club. He knew Walter and I—um, were intimate, let's say—and made me introduce him to Walter."

"And why is he an unsavory character?" Karen said. "Beyond running the—" She looked at her mobile. "—Lotus Club?"

Honey now almost whispered. "The club is unsavory enough. Card games and prostitution go on in the back rooms. Gao wanted me to serve the punters who played cards and later wanted me to pleasure the dirty old men there. I always refused to do the latter. It was demeaning enough to serve them and pretend up front on the stage that a brass pole was a penis."

Neither Bee nor Karen blinked at Honey's bluntness. They'd both heard worse.

"So, Walter and this bloke Gao Chen became business associates?" Bee said.

"Not for the raunchy stuff in the back of the club. Frankly, I don't know what was going on between them and Gao's friends, but it began to make Walter nervous. I think it was a lot more illegal than exploiting women, though, and that's bad enough."

"Could Walter have been exploiting you?" Karen said.

"No! Never! Walter treated me right. He wanted me to leave that life, to make a proper home for us, my baby girl and me. But I think he felt trapped in whatever Gao and his friends' shady business dealings were about."

"How did you get involved with Gao and his club?" Karen said.

*Not important, Karen,* Bee thought, although she was interested in the answer. It wasn't an unusual one.

"I needed a job. My father disowned me when I had Brigid."

"Brigid?"

"My baby girl's named after her maternal grandmother. That was to irritate her father, who abandoned us even before Brigid was born. He hated the Irish."

"Back to Walter," Bee said. "Were you living together?"

"No. I don't even know where he lived. Maybe near here because this is where the brokerage is? I visited him in his hotel room or saw him at the club when he was in the area."

“And you have no idea what he was involved in?”

“Something very illegal, I’m sure. He was very nervous about it, like I said.”

Bee turned to Karen. “I think we better get some SOCOs into Walter’s flat here, wherever it is. We should have done that earlier. My bad.” Karen nodded and made a note on her mobile with the stylus. “Are you and Brigid safe, Honey?” Bee said to the woman.

“I don’t know. If Gao finds out I talked to you two, probably not. He controls all the girls by fear.”

“Let’s make sure he doesn’t know then. And please don’t try to spy on Gao or his friends either. If Walter was afraid, there was a good reason for it. And he’s dead. So, protect yourself and your child. In fact, we can provide you two with a safehouse where you’ll be guarded if you feel threatened.”

“I can’t do that. It would be the same as telling Gao that I’ve talked to the police. With Walter gone, I don’t care about myself anymore, but I must protect Brigid.”

“Understood. I or someone else from this station might visit the club sometime soon. If you recognize anyone, please don’t let on that they’re coppers.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t. But what are they going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet. We need to find out what’s going on, Honey, because I’m sure it’s related to Walter’s death.”

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Karen ushered Honey out of the station, making sure no one was outside waiting for her and accompanying her until the taxi arrived. When she returned, Bee was staring at the case board.

“She’s scared,” Karen said.

“With good reason. And probably thinking she’s to blame for introducing her boss to Walter. We’re lucky that Honey came forward. I sure screwed up by not sending SOCOs to Walter’s place. It’s right here on the to-do list.” She pointed to the board. “I’ll call and have that done.” She gathered her thoughts while Karen repeated the survey of the few facts they had. “I think I’m going to send Carlos and Max clubbing tonight. Have them say they’re from Liverpool or maybe Manchester, hint that they’re looking for some investment action for their bosses and are looking for Walter.”

“Put them in tank tops, denims, and sneakers, and no one will know they’re coppers.”

“I hope you’re right. They can handle themselves well, but after Walter’s murder, Gao might be a bit nervous now. Or his friends are.”

“What do you think is going on, Bee?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe the SOCOs will find something at Walter’s flat. I want some PCs to keep an eye on Honey and Brigit as well.”

“That could be a tell for Gao and friends, like Honey said.”

“Hopefully they’ll only think that we now know Honey was involved with Walter but nothing more. And we do know that. I’d never forgive myself if something happened to those two.”

“I hear you, but their history is common enough. Especially now among immigrant women. We had a case of human trafficking not long ago. A truck in from Liverpool was filled with underage Irish girls.”

“How’d that turn out?”

“The usual way. We nicked the low-ranked ones responsible, but we couldn’t get anything on the higher-level arses.”

“And I suppose those young girls were heading for the sex-trade business. I saw similar things occurring in London. Evil men find all sorts of evil ways to make a living. Pandering to dirty old men is one of them. I think Walter got involved in something like that. I’d feel better if he wasn’t, so let’s hope it’s only sleazy investment practices.”

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The SOCOs’ visit produced no new information. The place had been tossed, so any evidence of value there might have been found and destroyed. Bee felt bad about that. Her delay might have cost her team access to valuable evidence, something that would at least have added more to Honey’s story.

The PCs reported that Honey and Brigit seemed safe enough in Honey’s bedsit. When she left for work, she’d leave Brigit with the landlady. A rapid check of that woman’s records simply showed that she was a pensioner whose husband had passed on; she’d turned their old house into rooms she leased to single women, apparently making an exception for a nice woman with a quiet little child.

Honey was doing her act when Carlos and Max arrived at the White Lotus.

They played their roles well. They wore small transmitters the size of buttons under their collars and had tiny receivers in one ear. The first would allow the two women outside the club to hear what their male colleagues and others inside the club said; the second would allow the women to make suggestions if necessary.

After sorting drinks, settling in a bit, and watching Honey’s first act, Max called the bouncer over and asked who she was.

“She’s not available lad. She’s a cold fish, I dare say, and the boss doesn’t like to disappoint the customers by claiming otherwise.”

“Speaking of your boss,” Carlos said, mostly hiding his Hispanic accent, “we’ve heard he’s looking for investors who are willing to take a few risks to make some big money. A broker named Walter suggested we contact him. Is Walter here, by the way? We’d like to say hello.”

The bouncer ignored the last request. “What sum do you do you have to invest? The boss has a high minimum for those profitable investments, I’m told. For example, I can’t participate. He doesn’t pay me enough.” He flashed a toothy smile. “But I can let him know you’re interested if there’s enough money involved.”

“So, you can pass my message on to him?”

“For a little brokerage fee of my own. What’s it worth to you?”

“Name your fee,” Max said.

“For two hundred pounds apiece, we might all become friends, and I could express your interest to the boss. But how much can you invest?”

“Likely a lot more than what he pays his staff here each year, I’m guessing. The amount depends on what he’s offering. Walter didn’t offer very many details.”

There was a chuckle. “Maybe I should have asked more for myself then. Let’s see the cash backing up your words.” There were some rustling noises. Bee figured the bouncer was counting what Carlos and Max had handed over, only about sixty-five percent of what Gladys had budgeted for the bribe that everyone knew would be needed. “Okay, lads. I’ll need your contact info now. He’ll be calling one of you.”

The two men would be handing over business cards with fake names and numbers for pay-as-you-go mobiles.

“Don’t take too long,” Carlos said in a low, threatening growl that made Bee smile. *Don’t ham it up too much, big boy!* “Our people can be impatient.” Bee winked at Karen.

“Enjoy your evening, gentlemen. We do have other girls who can entertain you in some back rooms if you have the time.”

“As well as card games,” Max said. “Walter told us. Some other time maybe. We’re not here for either one, to be honest, but we’ll enjoy the dancers a bit more. Remember what my friend said about our own bosses’ impatience.”

“I suspect they’re not locals,” the bouncer said. “I know most of the local people who could be interested in such investments.”

“Believe me, friend, you don’t want to know who our bosses are. It’s better to stick with us.”

“Okay. Have a good evening.”

The bouncer nodded at the bartender and disappeared into the rear of the club.

Over an hour later, Carlos and Max left, making sure they weren’t followed. Carlos made the motions as if he were calling a taxi, and a car pulled up that looked like one but wasn’t. Karen was its driver and Bee was in the passenger seat beside her. Karen had tucked her red hair under an Irish hat, so the two appeared to be a male taxi driver who was accompanied by his girlfriend or wife, not an uncommon occurrence that late at night. She even pulled down the meter.

“You two could have some sort of acting career,” Bee said to them after they left the club.

“Back at you,” Max said. “The bouncer was no Einstein, that’s for sure. Just hired muscle with enough smarts to filter out small-time investors.”

“And to stop any fights in the club as cover,” Carlos said. “Could do. About my size, he was.”

“But much uglier,” Max said.

Bee didn’t know how to interpret that, so she ignored it. “That related to one worry I had. You both can look like cherubs at times. Maybe too nice for a place like that. I hope your looks matched your words.”

“In any case, we’re more believable as thugs on a mission for their bosses than two women,” Max said with a laugh.

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They met in the station the next morning to wait for Guo’s call. Bee was called into Gladys’s office. Thinking that the DCI only wanted a report on the previous evening’s activities, she was surprised to see Rick Sanders and an older bloke there. Sanders stood and gallantly gestured towards the seat he’d just vacated.

“I’ll stand, Inspector Berkeley.”

“You know Agent Sanders, Bee,” Gladys said as Bee took Rick’s chair. “Our other visitor here is Agent Tom Price. He’ll tell you what he has told me about the investigation.”

“It’s rather easy to summarize: We want you to cease and desist, Inspector. You’re interfering with our op.”

“And you’re interfering with my murder investigation. Should I charge you both with obstruction of justice?”

Gladys smiled at Bee but said nothing. That was a sign to Bee that Gladys liked that threat and would back it up.

“You must realize that MI5’s op trumps your case.”

“My case is to find who killed Walter Branson. Is that your op’s goal? Justify yourself, Agent Price. I’m all ears.”

“Sorry, I can’t say what our goals are, only that our investigation’s more important for national security than your murder investigation.”

“I heard a lot of that crap from Agent Sanders, and I duly note it but will ignore it because there’s no justification for MI5 to take the case. You blokes are paid the big salaries to worry about national security, but you forget about the UK’s ordinary citizens who suffer at the hands of thugs and murderers. There are more people who appreciate what the police do for them than what MI5 does for anyone, and your hiding what you do doesn’t help that perception.”

“Be reasonable, Inspector. We expect cooperation from the police. You’re the one who will be obstructing justice. Our op, to be precise.”

“Bollocks! And your so-called cooperation is only one-way, us to you. I saw enough of that in London.” She glanced at Gladys and raised questioning eyebrows. *Are you going to back me up?*

“I’m sure they’re not objecting to our complete investigation, Bee, and they can’t take it over. They just don’t want us to proceed with our study of Guo’s involvement.”

“I wonder why. And doesn’t that prove my point, ma’am?” Bee knew that using “ma’am” would let Gladys know she was pissed with the whole discussion. “We suspect Guo’s involvement because Honey B. Goode came to us, not MI5. They don’t give a rat’s ass about her and her daughter.”

“Who’s this Honey B. Goode?” Rick asked.

Bee glared at him. “Again, Agent Sanders, you’re proving my point. Let’s just call her Walter’s friend.”

“You promised to share info with me. We insist on a better answer than that.”

“I made no such promise. Even if I did, I could deny it. Unless you were recording our conversation without my knowledge. If so, you can put me in irons and torture me!”

“Bee! That’s a bit much!” Gladys turned to Tom Price. “But she’s right. We have a plan and a duty to the public to find who murdered Branson. So far, I’ve heard nothing about MI5’s plans that you claim are so important for national security.”

“Let’s just say we’re after an entire conspiracy, Chief Inspector. Walter’s murderer is a minor player in all this, I assure you.”

“And the person who tried to kill me at the park?” Bee said.

Price glanced at Sanders. “You didn’t mention that, Rick.”

Sanders shrugged. “She was nosing around the crime scene alone. Either Walter’s killer was still around or someone else wanted to kill her. I didn’t consider that too important in the grand scheme of things. It’s nothing like an undercover op at the club, to be precise.”

“We’ll talk about that later.” Price nodded to Gladys. “Okay, let’s compromise. Because you already have an undercover op in progress, let’s work together. We want to know about Guo’s investment activities. That and your murder investigation aren’t incompatible, as I see them.”

“I’m not sure the Home Office will see it that way,” Sanders said.

“Shut up, Rick. We’re working together on this from now on. And I’ll no longer let you fly solo.”

Rick glared at his colleague—*no love lost there*, Bee thought—and then at Gladys and Bee. The latter saw Rick mouth the word “bitch” at her. She muzzled a laugh. *Up yours, pretty boy!*

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The briefing of the team that followed that meeting with Gladys and the two MI5 agents present was tense.

“Let me introduce everyone to Agents Tom Price and Rick Sanders from MI5. They’ll be working with us on the case.”

Bee saw her team’s frowns and wanted to slap the smirk off Rick’s mug. Max’s hand shot up.

“Does this mean our undercover op is dead in the water?” he said.

“Not at all. It means Agent Sanders will be an observer making suggestions if he’s able.”

“Do we have to accept them?”

“Rick, please answer Sergeant Bloomfield’s question.” This came from Price.

Rick glared at him and then Bee but forced a smile for the others. “My role is to determine if any action of this team will be prejudicial to our national security interests and act accordingly. Any member of the team who can’t abide by this constraint should recuse himself now.” He glared at Bee and Karen now. “Or herself, as the case might be.”

*Way to go, Rick, Bee thought. You’ve just dug your hole in the shit pile a lot deeper and crawled farther in.* “Let me insist that all that means is that Agent Sanders only has an advisory role, and I will make sure he does no more than that or he’ll suffer the consequences. Let’s proceed with the briefing.”

She looked around at her people in IR1. Many were smiling—*Why not? I just put the agent in his place!*—and others had a neutral expression, including Price, who seemed to have enjoyed the altercation. Only Rick frowned. *I’ll castrate you yet, you SOB!*

“Our prime suspect is now Guo Chen and whoever he’s dealing with in those questionable investments, whether local gangsters or foreign adversaries. Reading between the lines of what Honey B. Goode has revealed to us, Guo might be partnering with both, and for different reasons. That doesn’t mean he killed Walter Branson or tried to kill me, or even ordered either one, but he probably knows who did. We need to put the screws to him, make him cut a deal with us and reveal the killer as his collateral for the deal.”

“He might be so afraid of those he’s dealing with,” Karen said, “that nothing will make him talk.”

Bee saw Rick nod. “Life in prison without a chance for parole gives us a lot of leverage. Proving a close association with Walter would be a start that leads to that, and we basically have the beginnings of that from the bouncer. We’ll get there if we dig enough.” She looked around the group again. “That will be our focus now. I want to know more about Walter and Guo and their business relationship. Unless she’s lying, Honey can help us there. And oh, by the way, trust no one. We’ll confirm her story, for example, and even talk with the wanker who abandoned Honey and her child. We will make a case against Guo, no matter what it might be. If we shake the tree enough, the rotten fruit will fall.”

The meeting broke up soon after that when everyone was clear about their assignments. Bee and Rick were the last ones in IR1, and he sat smiling at her. “Bravo, madam, that was quite a show. What you proposed just might succeed. I’ll provide what we know about Guo. He’s not from Hong Kong like Honey, by the way, but Macao. His father ran a smuggling gang there but was murdered during a gang war, causing Guo to flee first to Hong Kong and then to the UK with his new British passport.”

“Fake, I presume?” Rick nodded. “So, why not arrest and deport him?”

"Because there are bigger fish to fry. MI5 wants to know about what his real business here is and with whom he's dealing. His club is a success, but it's not where all his money's coming from by any means."

"We'll find that out and slap him in the face with it. And, to add to what I said, life in prison without parole might not worry him as much as his colleagues turning on him like they must have done with Walter."

"Careful, Inspector. You don't have that many weapons at your disposal, so use them wisely."

"You just make sure that you're not hiding anything from me that's important for my case, or there'll be hell to pay."

She walked out of the room.

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Bee met Carlos in a pub near the nick before heading out to the club. Max would drop off Karen and pick up Carlos, and the two women would follow the two men in the taxi.

Carlos eyed her and flashed a grin as he sat their drinks on the table and crawled into the booth opposite her. "You make bad garb look good, you know."

She blushed a bit. *Was he joking? Didn't he see a tired, old woman with hair in disarray? Someone with breasts that could use some silicone?* She'd tried to look the part of a cab driver's wife, after all!

"I'm not used to flattery, but I'll take that as a compliment. As an old married woman, I didn't flirt, but that didn't stop the plonkers in my old London nick from chatting me up. Are you ready for tonight's clubbing?"

"As much as I can be. Guo called me, not his bouncer, so that's a good sign. I told him I had to give the bank check to him personally." He patted his breast where she knew his Glock was hidden. "And I'm ready if he resists arrest. The remainder is up to you three, putting the screws to him. He'll lawyer up, of course. I imagine he has a personal solicitor on retainer."

"Try to get him to say who killed Walter," Bee said, "but don't push too hard. We've got him even if he just receives the check. Admitting to Walter's murder would be a bonus. If he doesn't, we'll just have to work that much harder to make a case against him, but Gladys wanted those two options. What are you going to do with the bouncer?"

Carlos smiled. "Depends on his actions. Don't worry. Either Max or I can handle him."

"Max won't be carrying."

"He has skills, Bee. He can kill a man with his hands and feet if needs must."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"'Nough 'bout planning the op. Allow me to consider this our first date."

She was surprised by that request but considered it. She then smiled as well. "Why not? But aren't you moving a bit fast?"

"As you said, why not? I sense there's some good vibes between us. Is that a misconception?"

"Vibes? Yes, I suppose there's some kind of connection. And I know it's time to move on with my life, which is one reason I left London behind. But work relationships are complicated. For one thing, you must have realized I'm a bit worried about you in this op. You'll be in a hostile environment."

"I'm used to that. And our work won't interfere. We work with several local nicks, and your own work hopefully won't require an ARU very often. Also, it might not be my team if it

does. I'll be more worried about having the time to be together. This gig tonight might be a rare exception."

"That's a good point." *My husband and I didn't see enough of each other, and now he's gone!* "So, let's take it slow but move things along, Carlos, and see how it goes."

"*No problema*. I'm a patient bloke, not a pushy *macho* man."

She laughed now. "You look like one, though. And words like 'vibes,' 'gig,' '*no problema*,' and '*macho*' sound like one—maybe a Spanish gangster, to put a fine point on it."

"My ancestry sometimes seeps through my professionalism. Tonight, the latter will help me stay in character. But I'm not your typical egotistical Latin bloke. I'm looking for a soulmate, Bee, not a few hot dates. I've become a proper Englishman, you see."

"Yes, you are a proper English gentleman, but don't lose too much of that Latin flare, at least not with me. It's part of your bright personality." She took a dainty sip of her ale. *Best to keep a clear head tonight, Bee*. Carlos's words were already jumbling her thoughts. "I'm glad we had this time alone for this little chat."

They had to leave things at that because Karen was now walking towards their booth. "Max is waiting outside, Carlos."

Carlos stood, gave the two women a little salute, and left. They waited a few minutes and then followed in the fake taxi.

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"Oh, no. Look who's here!" Karen said.

Bee looked across her to see Rick Sanders walking to their taxi. Karen had parked in a different spot that was still near the club.

"Evening, ladies. I thought you might like some company." He patted his lapel. "Just consider me an ARO."

"I'll consider you a butt-in-sky," Bee said. "I said we'd keep you informed. Can't you wait until we have Guo in an interrogation room at least?"

"As a new agent, I'm supposed to show initiative. I'm showing it."

Bee sighed. "Get in the back. We'll pretend we're waiting for someone in that house. But I want you behind a one-way window when we interrogate the bloke. Otherwise, I'll have Carlos or Max put you in a cell. Understood?"

Still outside, he raised his hands in mock surrender, a gesture that someone might register. *Novice!*

"Fine. But if I hear something we can use, all bets are off."

"No. I don't want you near Guo until we're done with him. Understood?"

"Understood and duly ignored. You can't tell MI5 what to do."

Bee reached over and locked the taxi's door. She then waved goodbye to him. He returned to his BMW rental car and sped off.

"You haven't seen the last of him, boss," Karen said.

"I suppose not. But I'll not have him here messing up our operation. And I'm calling the duty sergeant to keep him out of our nick too. When we have something for MI5, we'll pass it on, but, until then, they can go to hell. Especially Rick Sanders."

"I think he enjoys badgering you."

"Young egotistical pricks at my London nick often tried that on, criminals and coppers. They soon learned that I could put a man in his place. The Met has a lot of chauvinistic clods still, bigots and racists as well, but things are improving even there. Our station does much better. Don't ever let the *macho* types put you down, Karen."

"I don't know. I feel *macho* myself in this garb. This damn mustache itches tonight, though. Hopefully, it all ends here."

"Yes, time to listen in."

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Bee tuned the transceiver to the correct channel. Carlos and Max were just ordering drinks. After they were delivered, he said to the waitress, "Your boss and we two have some business to discuss. Is he in?"

Bee knew he would now be offering a tip to her for the drinks and that information.

"I can see. He usually attends to business in his office, though."

"Understood. We're willing and able to do so if he's here. If he's not, the deal's off."

"Have some patience, big man. And we could have some fun while you do."

*The slut, thought Bee. She's offering a damn quickie!*

"Maybe afterwards, as a celebration for closing the deal."

"You're on." A few minutes passed until she returned. "Follow me, please."

"It's going down," Karen said.

Bee flipped the transmitter switch. "Be careful, fellows. If Guo or some colleague killed Walter, Guo is a dangerous man."

"Don't worry. He might have muscle with him, but he's just an old Chinaman."

"Carlos and Max, welcome. Have a seat. You know Ralph. Do you have the check?"

Ralph was the bouncer, now in the role of bodyguard. Unless there were guns involved, Carlos and Max could handle both.

"Do you have the paperwork?"

"A receipt for the shares your bosses are purchasing."

"Let's see it, please."

Carlos took his time examining the receipt. "Okay, Mr. Chen. Here's your bank check. We'll be off now."

"Please return when you have more time. We offer a wide variety of entertainment here."

Bee and Karen heard the bouncer's snicker. *Time for action, old woman!*

Karen made a U and drove the short distance to the club where they'd wait for Carlos and Max to bring out Guo if their business was indeed finished.

"Say, old chap," they heard Carlos say, "we haven't seen or heard from Walter in a while. Any idea where he is? We'd like to thank him for putting us onto this investment."

"I'm afraid Mr. Branson had a little accident," Guo said. "The owners of the companies your bosses invested in thought he was a liability. I'm sure your people will understand what often happens in that case."

Bee could imagine Guo's smirk. *But is that enough of a confession?* Apparently, Carlos didn't think so.

"In other words, he knew too much. I hope you solved that potential problem in an acceptable manner. Our bosses have enough to worry about with our local plods."

"Seems that he ODED with heroin," Ralph said. "At least he died happy. We almost got one of our own local plods who'd given some friends in London problems before she came here."

"Shut up, Ralph!" Guo said.

"You're both under arrest," was Carlos's response.

All hell broke loose. Bee and Karen didn't wait. They bolted into the club.

"Police! Stay seated!" Karen yelled at the customers.

They then heard a shot. Guo Chen dashed out of the back room and ran right into Bee's fist just before Karen tackled him. While her sergeant cuffed him, Bee went into the back room. Max had a shoulder wound. Carlos was okay. Ralph was on the floor unconscious.

"I told you we could handle them," Carlos said.

She took out her mobile. "I'm calling for PCs and EMTs." She turned to Max. "Let me see if I can stop the bleeding."

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While Bee and Karen faced Guo and his solicitor in the interrogation room, Gladys watched from behind the one-way window with Rick Sanders.

"This is crunch time," Gladys said. "We've got Guo for an illegal investment scheme and murdering Walter Branson. Let's see if he'll admit to some other things you people might be able to use. Courtesy of the house."

"I should be in there."

"No, I don't think so. You see, if anything, Guo is an arrogant and misogynistic prick who thinks he can manipulate women. Bee and Karen won't be manipulated. But you could be because you're young and inexperienced. Besides, it's better that he doesn't know MI5 is involved."

Rick sighed. "Okay. It's your show, ma'am. It had better be a good one."

"Oh, it will be, Mr. Sanders! I guarantee it."

At first, the solicitor was able to keep his client to many repetitions of "no comment," but Bee was good at interrogation. She made Guo angry, and he lost control. Besides saying that she was lucky to have escaped Ralph's sharpshooting—she knew that was giving the bouncer too much credit—he said that he knew that leaving her alive hadn't been a good idea.

"They wanted you dead as well!"

"And who would that be, Mr. Chen? The owners of the companies where you offer investment opportunities? We have some of their names now. Interpol and other friends will put the screws to them. I'm certain they'll throw you under the bus. We should release you to see how long you survive. They will do to you what you did to Walter Branson."

"They ordered that. I do just do what they want."

"And they will order someone to eliminate you as well."

He blanched, his pale-yellow facial skin turning more pallid. "You have to protect me!"

"*No problema* if you give us evidence about all who're involved in your little conspiracy. I'm betting those same companies are trying to obtain controlling shares in our UK companies as well. Am I right?"

"Don't answer that," hissed the solicitor.

"Shut up! It's not your life on the line."

Guo couldn't be more cooperative after that, much to his solicitor's displeasure.

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Once they arrived at Carlo's flat, Bee stored her tote bag containing her jogging clothes, trainers, and a few other things just inside the door. She then uncorked a red to let it breathe while she put their dinner into serving bowls and plates, and Carlos placed wine and water glasses along with plates, tableware, and napkins on the counter that served as the dining table in his small abode. She noted that most everything, though clean, was chipped or tarnished from long use, and the wine glasses didn't match, but she was enjoying their little celebration after a complex and intense case.

"How's Max doing?"

Carlos and his team of AROs had been called out for two other cases in the days since that night at the club, so their celebration, like Bee's team's, had been a bit delayed. In her case, even Gladys had pitched in to sort the evidence for the Crown Prosecution Service.

"I think he and others from my team are having their own celebration at the pub where we had our first date. An arm in a sling won't slow Max down too much for that, I imagine. I pretended I was an exhausted old lady, wished them well, and came here."

"Smart. We'll have our own celebration. And how did the CPS react to all the evidence? Thank the good Lord that I only must write brief reports, although I suppose I might have to appear in Crown Court."

"They say we have enough evidence against Guo and Ralph to try them for murder, although Guo might get a nod or two of support for snitching on his investors and other financial colleagues. That could be offset by the fraud charges, of course." She smiled as she watched him take a big helping of curry. He followed that by devouring a third of his naan and half his glass of wine. "MI5, NCA—they're more involved now in the gangland connections—and Interpol might have a go at Guo's collaborators in Europe and here, local gangsters and Chinese spies and companies that were involved. The housecleaning goes way beyond our murder case, so Agent Price is a happy man."

Carlos nodded. "Bee, none of that is a bad way for you to begin your career at your new place of work, our regional station. And you've hooked this old fish in the process."

"You can be sure I won't let it go to my head. But if you keep eating and drinking like that, you'll fall asleep before dessert."

"Um, I don't remember any dessert being included in the takeaway dinner."

"I brought it separately. I have a new negligee in my tote bag I'd like to model for you."

He smiled. "Good thing it's our second date since otherwise, I'd think you're a loose woman, Inspector Berkeley. And who the hell needs a negligee?"

## A New Murder Case

“Another one, ma’am?”

Bee stopped staring at the wall of the cubby she had sequestered to look up at Peggy, her amiable and attentive server. She then glanced at her empty glass.

“I guess. I’m walking home, not driving. Carlos is on a case tonight.”

Peggy knew Carlos, of course. The big ARO was her companion often enough at the pub. Their relationship was progressing. *Maybe too fast*, Bee thought. *I miss him when he’s not here.*

She’d requested a transfer from the Met to the substation upriver from London for multiple reasons, but one was a hope that she’d have a more peaceful policing experience away from the Big Smoke and its criminal underbelly now characteristic of so many big cities in the world. She’d also wanted to get away from the Met’s internal politics that she felt got in the way of effective policing.

But her first experience with her new team had been as SIO of a complex and intense murder case that was on a par with anything that she’d ever had in London—not worse, by any means, but stressful because she’d worked with a new team. Since then, she had relaxed a bit, if that was the right word, by tending to violent domestic disputes, carjackings, jewelry store robberies, and a few drug cases too small for NCA drugs-interdiction efforts to handle as part of its campaigns against organized crime. That had been more like it! While often violent, they’d been easy cases to handle. And she’d had more time to spend with Carlos.

DI Belinda Berkeley, known as Bee to her friends, had temporary lodging in a boarding house only two blocks away from the pub. Her new nick was three blocks in the opposite direction. That meant that even in winter, with its late mornings’ dawns and early evenings’ darkness, it was much easier to walk than drive in the dense traffic. Her deceased husband’s Rover now sat most of the time in a car park near the boarding house, covered with a tarp, the lease of the spot having become a constant drain on her finances. He had passed on three years ago, and his vehicle hadn’t been driven much since then.

“Same, Bee?”

“You know me, Peggy. At my age, I’m not changing my ale if you have it on hand.”

Peggy served her usual, she took a sip, and then continued to stare at the wall.

While she had been a steady client of *The Wild Horse* for most of her time as a DI in her new nick in the Thames River Valley, in the Big Smoke she’d often gone with Rodney to similar establishments. She imagined him now sitting across from her, blathering on about his legal cases and clients at Anderson, Berkeley, and Carruthers, his law firm. Nothing confidential, of course, because of attorney-client privilege, but enough to offer her a distraction from her own work at the Met. She still missed those evenings.

“Thought you might be here.”

The young man who’d dared to interrupt her thoughts slid into Rodney’s side of the cubby and didn’t once blink upon receiving her multiple glares, his rewards for the interruption.

“I told you to go home, Max. We can finish the paperwork for the case tomorrow.”

“Sod your bad humor, boss. Karen sent me here to cheer you up. I’m responding to the challenge.”

DC Karen Strong and DS Max Bloomfield were on Bee’s investigation team. They’d just finished a depressing case where a drunk husband had put his wife in the hospital. Senseless rage and violence made for an easy-to-solve case, but one that had been appalling and disgusting from

the very beginning. Now only the paperwork remained, most of it involving prep for the Crown Prosecution Service.

Bee guessed that she'd been lucky to close the case so quickly. Her husband Rodney had been a jewel and a cheerleader who always had supported her career. Some cases required long work hours, and he would never complain. And he'd been such a jolly, good-humored bloke that he'd always managed to make her laugh with his off-color jokes about both their occupations and their associated trappings. Now she had a solid relationship with Carlos, whose work rarely intersected with hers, allowing them to become close when both their schedules permitted. That night was an exception. *Is that what Karen is considering? Does she think I'll be maudlin without him to cheer me up?* She pondered those questions and decided that an honest answer would have to wait for another ale.

"Max, I don't need cheering up right now. I've been in this same sad state so many times before meeting Carlos that it's like wearing an old comfy pair of shoes."

"Bollocks! The last case was depressing, and you don't have Carlos here to pick your spirits up. I know you too well now. You're lucky, you know; a lot luckier than I've been." He looked around and then leaned nearer to her across the table. "Which is why I want to tell you about my new romantic interest. His name's Bobby."

She shook her head in the negative. "Please, no details. And don't say, 'He's the one.' I've heard that already too often. You need to find a steady partner, Max."

"Back at you. And Bobby could be the one for me. And you are lucky to have Carlos. You're far too young to be alone, Bee."

She frowned. "If I had a fiver for every time I've heard someone tell me that after Rodney died, especially men who want to prey on gullible widows, I could retire right now and go live on the isle of Capri. That's why Carlos and I are taking it slow. He's heard it a lot too, mostly from relatives who think a Latino man must have at least one woman in his life."

"Don't lose him. Otherwise, what will happen is that you'll end up retiring and living alone, a bitter old woman pissed about life. I—"

Her mobile's ominous vibration and burpy beeps interrupted what Max was going to say. She read the text message.

"Stuff it, Max. We have a new case, thank God."

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"Could be a suicide," Max said after studying the body that had been pulled out of the Thames.

"I want to know exactly how they found the body," Bee said, nodding at two people leaning on the SOCOs' van and drinking tea. "Go chat with those two rowers."

The stretch of the Thames upriver from central London was a playground for city dwellers wanting some fresh air and a bit of strenuous exercise. Much farther along was Oxford, and energetic rowers from there, often students, sometimes came as far down to where they stood to cross paths with those coming upriver. Bee couldn't tell top which group the two rowers belonged.

Thos two who'd fished out the body from the reeds were kayakers. Bee had decided they were more Max's age than hers. He was a toff who became a policeman after college and a stint in the Royal Marines, much to his parents' objections. The woman rower was a stunner. Her companion might not like it when Max tried his usual "Me Tarzan, you Jane" charm on her because it was difficult to guess what the DS's sexual preferences were. Max counted on that with the woman, of course, which Bee always found amusing.

She, on the other hand, concentrated on the forensics. Information gleaned from witnesses could never compare in quality to cold, hard scientific facts.

“What’s the story, Gwen?”

Bee had met Dr. Gwendolyn Harris on her very first case at her new nick. The pathologist stopped her Russian-style dance in a crouch around the body long enough to glance up at Bee. “I won’t have a complete post-mortem until—”

“—you have the body on your morgue’s table. I know the drill. I heard that often enough in the Big Smoke. But is this a case of suicide? Answer yes, and I’ll leave you alone, because it’s someone else’s problem then.”

“Probably some poor DC’s who has to inform relatives and friends, I suppose.” Gwen sighed. “Tentative determination: It’s not a suicide. There are rope marks on the wrists and ankles and bruises on the neck. I don’t know of any fish in the Thames that can do that.”

“Not many fish in this stretch of the Thames to begin with. Not all its pollution comes upriver from London either.”

“The Big Smoke contributes the most, though, if only through tide movements, and we’re not that far upriver, Bee, as much as you’d like it to be farther.”

*That’s true enough*, Bee thought. She’d taken the first opening away from London that she’d seen, a parallel transfer that had turned out okay. She nodded. “Carry on.”

She left Gwen, Max, and the DCs to organize visits with anyone on either side of the river who might have heard or seen something. Fortunately, there weren’t apartment buildings to visit, just clumps of summer cottages and houses scattered here and there, but she’d told Max to be on the lookout for the homeless and drunks as well. There had been plans to gentrify the area for donkey’s years, but not even the Tories’ best friends could squeeze money out of Parliament now for waiting urban development projects.

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Bee had assigned herself the task of going over the preliminary post-mortem that was waiting for her when she returned to the station. TOD: Between five and six p.m. COD: Strangulation. The first datum from Gwen meant after dark, quite a few hours before Max and she had left the pub. The cursory details related to the second datum were puzzling. A killing just for the pleasure of killing? Why try to make it look like suicide? Or had they? Did the victim know something that his assailants also wanted to know? All that might imply that the abductors were amateurs...or thugs who just didn’t care and hadn’t had any intentions of making the murder appear like a suicide? It was a lot more obvious it wasn’t, more so than with her first case.

And then there was the all-important question: Who was the victim? The rowers had no idea, that was certain. They’d been sent home because they could provide no useful information beyond indicating where they’d found the body in the reeds at river’s edge.

She gave Max a call. “It will be an almost impossible task to find more witnesses, but we should try to find other boaters who went out for a romantic late afternoon’s getaway.”

“And all those will be impossible to track down because of the number and their now being long gone. We’ll need to use the media to ask anyone who knows something to come forward. That probably won’t produce any results.”

“Yes, who wants to help the police these days? Can’t be bothered. Write some suggestions for doing that anyway. It’s a perfect job for the DCI. Neither people nor the media will pay attention to a lowly DI or DS. Not in the London conurbation. Consider that a blessing.

See me when you return here. We need to get Karen involved and ponder the case's details a bit together."

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The "do you know this man?" bulletin went out on social and news media, newspapers and telly news included. In the capital, no one would pay much attention; locals might, though, because it had occurred nearer home. They then had the usual crazies making time-wasting calls to the police, the farthest originating in Aberdeen where an eighty-one-year-old woman swore their victim was her son who was an MIA from the overseas' NATO peacekeeping mission in the old Yugoslavia; but there was one that put Bee and Max on the road: A London estate lawyer had taken a two-week holiday but hadn't returned to work when others in the firm had expected him to arrive there on the day before the bulletin. His employer had called it in. Bee was struck by the parallels with her very first case at her new nick.

"We think your victim is our Ralph Barnes," Stephen Oxbridge, a partner in the firm and Ralph's immediate superior said. "If true, he'll be missed. He was an affable and brilliant bloke well-liked by everyone, both clients and coworkers." Stephen pulled a long face. "Earlier I sent my secretary to his flat, but no one responded to her knock. We became worried because it isn't like him to not call. Ralph never had a sick day as far back as I can remember, and I'm sure he'd have called in for that or any other pressing reason."

Bee asked for more information about the missing colleague, obtained the address and phone number for the flat, and left Oxbridge to his worries about what had happened because they had no answers yet.

In the car park outside the firm, she said to Max, "Before we go dashing off to this Ralph's address, let me give him a call. He just might answer."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"No, but I don't want to waste a trip either. I know the traffic will be a nightmare. Better than London proper but heading that way and still awful." She punched in the number but gave up after ten rings. "Okay, Sherlock, let's make the trip. Put the address in the GPS."

Near the city, the more rural Thames Valley had many more hamlets and villages. Fens and farmland and other rural features becoming more prevalent as one traveled upriver towards Oxford, a large city known for its university, And these all made any detour off major roads problematic.

Ashford, where Ralph Barnes had lived, was nearer the city than their nick was, a village with not much of a downtown straddling its high street, the name a hint to its past. That village feeling was lost in the middle of many *culs de sac* filled with expensive cottages and homes where rich toffs lived but worked in London. Bee made a mental note to find out if their victim had a small London flat nearer his workplace. Otherwise, the fellow's commute every morning and evening would have been challenging, to say the least.

His residence in Ashford was more modest than his neighbors', though, so Barnes could have afforded that additional London flat. Upon arrival, they first peered into the attached garage. No vehicle. Bee made a mental note: *Does he have one? And does that mean his abductors had stopped him on some country road to kidnap him? Or did he meet someone somewhere?* Because no one at the law firm knew where or when he was going on his holiday, or if his time off included meeting with some client (his included buyers, sellers, and companies of estate agents arranging sales), any abductor could have kept him prisoner for a while before killing him.

“Maybe we can at least find out where he was going on his holiday,” Max said, as if he’d been reading her mind. “There could be reservations, tickets, or whatever inside.”

Bee’s ringtone sounded. She saw who it was and put her other DS on speakerphone.

“Ralph Barnes’s parents have passed on, he never married, and he has no siblings. Other than that, I couldn’t find much about him.”

“My bad, Karen. His place of work probably has more information than his address and phone number. At least some sort of CV, I imagine, albeit dated—where he went to school, previous employment, and so forth. Give his boss Stephen Oxbridge a call and ask him if his secretary can send us his personal data.” Bee thought a moment. “On second thought, hold off on that. We’re at his house now. We’ll see what we can find here. We might just be chasing a man who got tired of his job and wanted to escape to some little fishing shack in the Lake District. Either Max or I will get back to you if we find out more about him.”

By that time, they’d walked up to the front door, and Max was studying the lock.

“Don’t even think about it, Sergeant. We’re doing this by the book.”

“Since he’s dead, we don’t need a warrant.”

“Point taken. But if he weren’t dead, he could sue our arses and easily win the case, not to mention that any evidence found here, whether he was alive or dead, might be thrown out. Also, any distant relative in his will might go after us. Let’s look in the side and back windows. The curtains are drawn here.”

The legal-entry discussion ended when they found that the back patio door had a broken glass pane. “We now suspect foul play’s occurred here, right boss?”

“Clearly Oxbridge’s employee gave up too easily. Just watch out for the broken glass when you reach through to open the door.”

The place had been turned into a tip.

“They were looking for something,” Max said. “I’m guessing he was home at the time, so they kidnapped him when they couldn’t find it. Or they found him later if he wasn’t home.”

“I’m going with the latter. So, where was he? Don’t say ‘on holiday.’ He was dumped into the Thames, so he was somewhere in the London area.”

“Back to the original plan? There are two places where we might find answers: the kitchen and the study.”

The kitchen had a wall calendar with a date circled and the name Carol in small print. They’d have to find out who she was. In the study, they found receipts for two roundtrip tickets to Paris and a confirmed reservation for a Paris hotel. Max whistled at the hotel room’s price, mentally converting the euros to pounds.

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Bee was beginning to get worried. If their victim’s killer hadn’t found what they wanted, would they go after the victim’s coworkers? Or this Carol? With every hour that passed, those people might be in danger. She called Ralph’s workplace and warned them, telling them she’d send some constables to keep an eye on the firm’s visitors, but she didn’t have enough personnel to protect the employees away from work, so they’d have to be careful. They had no idea who Carol was, though.

That done, she returned to that most important question: *How do I begin to find this woman Carol?*

Karen interrupted Bee’s musings. The order to look for the homeless and drunks had paid off. A vagrant who liked to wander along the river had seen two men with another bloke who

might be the victim go into an old warehouse. The victim had gone against his will. Moreover, the PC who took the vagrant's statement said that Earl Dickson seemed to be a reliable witness.

The PC left the old man with Bee and Max and went to continue his walk-about back, although Bee told him to focus on the parcel of land between the warehouse and the river's edge. The warehouse was upriver from where the victim had been found, but it might be the place where he'd been tossed into the Thames, the currents carrying him downriver a bit.

Max had spotted an office area on the second floor. They sat Earl behind an old desk in the only chair while they stood. Bee was tired, though, so she soon perched on the desk's edge, leaving her much younger sergeant standing.

She didn't quite know how to approach her witness, but he smiled at her. "Are you comfortable, Mr. Dickson?"

"I feel like I'm a headmaster again, and you've been a naughty lass, although I've never had such a lovely young student dare to perch atop my desk."

"You were a headmaster?"

He shrugged. "'Were' is the key word, Inspector. I managed to destroy my career, lose my wife and family, and become a vagrant. Unlike many of my luckless colleagues who share my life now, liquor wasn't my problem." He stopped, looked up at her, and said, "But you don't want to hear about my sad history, I suppose. I couldn't lie to that nice PC. I think I saw what happened to the person in your bulletin."

"Mr. Dickson, please be advised that I like to know all I can about my witnesses. It speaks to their reliability." *Why am I saying this?* She decided that it was because Earl was an unusual witness and probably an intelligent and observant fellow. *What happened to him?* "Can I call you Earl?" He nodded. "Tell me how you became homeless, Earl."

"Horses, Inspector. Like many addictions, betting on the nags becomes self-destructive. You keep thinking the next bet will make you a rich man. But too many bad ones made me flee for my life because I couldn't pay off my gambling debts." He jerked a thumb towards his chest. "And here I am, basically in hiding. The details don't matter."

She nodded. "Perhaps we can do something about that. But now, please tell me what you saw."

He gathered his thoughts for a moment. "Three colleagues and I were spending the night in this lovely travelers' inn by the old river Thames when two thugs appeared, dragging your victim. At least I think that's who it was. His hands and feet were bound, and he had a gag in his mouth. But I'm getting ahead of myself because I saw all that while hiding on the stairwell we just climbed. My colleagues had already done a runner—they have an aversion to most authorities—but this old tomcat was curious. Always have been that way, I dare say. Someday it will get me killed, I suppose, but it was dark enough that the thugs didn't see me."

"What happened?" Max said.

"Aha, the young sergeant can speak." Earl smiled at Bee. "I see that you're in the teaching profession as well. I hope you have better luck than I did. With your student, I mean." He flashed a wink at Max and then sighed. "To continue: They ripped off the tape serving as a gag and beat the poor fellow, I assume to try to get information from him. 'We'll make it quick if you talk,' the little thug said. 'Where is it?' The big bloke called that little man 'boss.' Your victim refused to tell them anything, so the little one told the big one to strangle the poor fellow. He did, and they then carried him out of the warehouse. To dump him in the river, I suppose. I stayed in hiding, feeling guilty about not having done anything."

"And how can you be sure he was our victim?" Max said.

"I can't. But you plods aren't supposed to believe in coincidences, are you? If not your victim, he was yet another one. Like I said, I regret not having the courage to try to save him."

"Then you might have become another victim, Earl. Instead, you can continue to do your civic duty by helping us find those two scrotes." Bee smiled. *I bet he's read a few detective stories in his time.* "And coincidences do occur. As you say, someone was a victim here, and it's best we find out who that someone was and who's responsible."

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Bee told Max that she thought their witness's two thugs might be gangsters up from London. Had either Ralph or Carol had information about gang activities? Or connections to them? To be determined. They would have to find this Carol and look at Barnes's client list. He was only a solicitor, but solicitors did all sorts of things for their clients, whether clean or dirty, from taxes to representation in police interrogations. Yet Ralph's specialty had been estate sales. *Is some client doing something crooked in that particular business?*

She thought of her first case at her new nick. They'd discovered that some Chinese companies were buying up UK properties on the sly as well as purchasing controlling shares in UK companies. There were some similarities with this new case. She couldn't let them bias her thoughts.

Bee put Karen and two DCs on trying to track down Carol, and she assigned Max the task of visiting the law firm to find out who Ralph's clients were. She expected the law firm would push back on that, so they might need a warrant, if only for the estate sales Ralph had worked on, especially if they were still ongoing. She didn't expect that the mysterious Carol would be easy to find either.

She went to the DCI's office to update Gladys.

"You know, Bee, I'd hoped that your first case here was an outlier and there'd be no more murders for a while. I'd like to leave all the murder cases to the Met. Our patch doesn't have the crime London does, so that's usually possible. And we don't have the personnel either."

"I hadn't expected to be involved with MI5, NCA, and Interpol in that first case either."

"Point taken. But shit happens. What's going on with this new case?"

"Early days, Gladys." That was Bee's old excuse she'd used at the Met. She reluctantly used it with her new DCI, who was a lot more approachable than her old superiors, most of them misogynist pricks.

"Do you have enough for a press conference? The media rats are already gnawing at my door looking for that rich cheese of scandal and police incompetence."

"Word spreads faster here than in the Big Smoke because people assume it's quieter. I suppose it is in general. People are inured to murder and mayhem in the capital, but it's scandal here."

"Yes, our media rats' appetite for scandal is greater as a consequence," Gladys said, her frown accompanied by a sigh.

"Hold them off a bit longer. Give me twenty-four at least. Let me summarize what we've learned."

When she left the DCI's office for hers next door, she knew one thing was better at her new nick: Her DCI was more involved and a lot more understanding than her old one. Gladys and she worked well together, as it should be, bouncing ideas off each other and making follow-up suggestions. And Bee loved that Gladys didn't mind facing the media trolls!

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As Bee had expected, Ralph's law firm invoked attorney-client privilege to deny the police information about Ralph's clients. Karen and DC Sam Hunter came through with information on the mysterious Carol, though. Carol Trent was a nurse at a local NHS clinic who was supposedly on vacation, but the clinic's director had no idea where she'd gone. The clinic gave them an address.

The two coppers walked up to Carol's flat located in a ten-floor apartment building; the door was locked, and no one responded to Karen's knock. Sam peered through the mail chute.

"Looks like she minimal furnishings. Almost in the demo state of a model apartment. Maybe she hasn't been here in a while?"

They'd already called at the the destination indicated on the travel reservation and tickets they'd found. *Where is she?* Karen thought.

"Kind of posh here, isn't it?" Sam said as they waited for the lift to return to the lobby.

She looked around at the carpeted hall, fancy wallpaper, and expensively framed prints. She remembered the receptionist in the lobby, who she'd studied from afar; and the security guard, who'd been sitting catty-corner to her; as well as the heavy pile carpeting and rich wood trim everywhere there as well. Even the lobby had looked expensive. "Um, I wonder how she manages to pay the lease here every month."

"With sugar-daddy Ralph's help?"

"Or, some other sugar daddy, extra funds not received in a nurse's paycheck in any case. Bee has another DC looking more into her background."

After returning to the lobby and waving the warrant they'd brought in the face of the security guard, he provided a key.

The lift dumped them back onto Carol's floor. They headed down the corridor, again their footsteps muted by the plush carpet. "And now we'll wait for the SOCOs."

When they arrived, they used the key to enter. The air inside was stale, so they left the door of the flat open. No one knew if a crime had been committed in the flat, but a thorough search would be made.

"Anything interesting or suspicious?" Karen asked the SOCO she saw in the galley kitchen.

"You can come in as long as put on the garb and stay in the living and dining area. Nothing there of note, so we're through with that. So far, the place is spotless. Look at the pics on the faux fireplace mantle, though."

After donning the required garb, Karen and Sam approached the fireplace. Like many modern flats, it had gas logs you could turn on with a remote, more for ambiance than warmth. There were several shots of Ralph and Carol together, one from some southern resort where the pudgy lawyer had a protective arm around the svelte nurse—he was in swim trunks; she wore a bikini.

"Sugar daddy," Karen said. "He's at least ten years older than she is."

She thought of Bee's relationship with Carlos. Even though he might be Ralph's age, Bee and Carlos were more or less the same age. She didn't know how old he was and didn't think she'd heard anyone mention his age.

"More logical for it to be the other way around, don't you think?" Karen added.

"I believe the Yanks call the woman in that case a cougar and not a sugar momma. Our own term goes after the man again: gigolo."

Karen smiled. "In both cases, money's often involved. The woman wants the man's, or the man wants the woman's. A subject for romantic comedies and maybe police procedurals."

“And Agatha Christie-like murder mysteries. Is ours one?”

A male SOCO came out of the bedroom. He showed them a bikini to the two officers. “’Twas still in the shopping bag, officers. Suitcases are still in the closet. If she’d planned to go with her beau on a holiday, she didn’t take much with her, not even recently purchased swimwear.”

“I’m sending you a photo of a list of names and phone numbers to your mobile,” the SOCO who’d greeted Bee called out from the galley kitchen. “I found them on a pad by the phone.”

Karen forwarded the photo to Sam and they both studied the list. Ralph had a number there that didn’t correspond to either work or home numbers. Karen assumed it was for a mobile. The name of Ralph’s boss also appeared with his work number; Karen assumed that he knew about the relationship, so he’d withheld information. The number of a taxi service was on the list as well as a number without a name.

“Guess she didn’t want to keep any of those on her phone,” Sam said. “Shall we call the number without a name?”

“In a moment.” She turned to the SOCO. “Thanks. This is useful. Bag the list. I want to know if there are physical traces here besides those for Carol and Ralph. The place hardly looks lived in.”

“She’s a nurse. Maybe she’s just super-organized?”

“Or, maybe she spent most of the time at Ralph’s place?” Karen said.

“No evidence for that.”

Karen held up a finger. “I remember something interesting.” She brought up on her mobile’s tiny screen a society page from a local broadsheet that mentioned Ralph’s boss. “Take a look at this.”

“‘Stephen Oxbridge and his lovely wife Carol were also in attendance,’” Sam read. “Do you think that’s why we haven’t found the mysterious Carol? That she was right here all the time because she’s the boss’s wife?”

“It’s possible, but Carol is a common-enough name. Professional women often keep their maiden names these days. And Carol could be a last name too.”

“I’ll check that out when we return to the station.”

“Or we can just ask Oxbridge, without giving anything away, of course.”

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Bee and Karen traveled to Oxbridge’s mansion, their excuse being to talk with Carol’s husband about Ralph’s work. Thanks to Gladys, a judge had overruled the solicitor’s claim about attorney-client privilege because one, transfers of property after a sale were put in the public record, and any still pending would soon be there as well; and two, the attorney in question was deceased, and no other attorney represented the clients participating in the sales.

While some DCs were at Ralph’s firm copying those records, the two officers would deliver the warrant in person to Oxbridge and ask him for help in indicating contentious estate deals. All that would let Bee talk with the solicitor about his wife’s relationship with Ralph. If Oxbridge knew about it, or even suspected it, there might be tells in the conversation that showed he was somehow involved in his employee’s demise.

They never entered the attorney’s estate, though. As they approached the main entrance from the south, a classic Ferrari roared out the drive and turned to head north. The red hair gave the driver away: Carol Trent aka Carol Oxbridge.

“Here’s me after that sports car!” Bee said. She flicked on the blues and twos, even though she knew the pool’s little EV could never catch a Ferrari. It didn’t stop in response to the pursuit either but sped on. On the roundabout just before entering the motorway, Carol took the curve too fast. She left the road first on two wheels and then the expensive car went into a roll, ending up a good distance into the bog at the side of the roundabout.

“Flames in the motor!” Karen said.

She jumped out of the EV even before Bee came to a stop. Bee was soon right behind her.

There was no time to waste calling for a fire truck and ambulance. The two officers managed to pull Carol out from the convertible and drag her some thirty yards away before the petrol tank blew. They were thrown to the ground on each side of Carol.

Bee shook her head to clear it, realizing all three might have a concussion from the blast. Both she and Karen had some cuts from flying chips of windscreen glass. Carol might be worse off because they’d been dragging her by the legs. Bee managed to stand and began to make calls. After she finished, she plopped down into a lotus position and surveyed the situation.

It was clear that desperation had motivated Carol’s quick getaway. But why was she desperate? *We must interrogate her before her husband can intervene!*

Bee and Karen followed the ambulance to the hospital. As she drove, Bee was wondering if saving his wife’s life was enough to prevent Oxbridge from suing her and the police for acting on the warrant without it being served. *Sod him!*

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They got to Carol before her husband, and she looked suitably grateful at Bee and Karen.

“You were lucky, Mrs. Oxbridge. We all were. Whatever motivated that reckless escape? We were coming to serve a warrant to your husband.”

She sighed. “He already knew about it. He was furious. He said it was all my and Roger’s fault. He told me to get out or he’d kill me, so I did. It wasn’t about you two. It was all about him. I didn’t even see you until you started the siren and set the lights flashing. Then I got desperate. I thought he was going to blame me for Roger’s death!”

*Interesting*, Bee thought. “And where were you going in such a rush?”

She had paused to catch her breath but now shrugged. “A hotel, I suppose. Any hotel. I don’t think they would come after me.”

“They?”

“The ones who killed Ralph. My husband didn’t do that. He had every reason, but he’s not a violent man, just angry. Ralph did it for me, for us, you know. We loved each other, and I wanted to leave Stephen and be with Ralph. Stephen just considers me an ornament; Ralph was much more considerate.”

“You have to realize that in these situations,” Karen said, “the first suspect in Ralph’s death must be your husband, right? Especially now.”

“But that would be wrong. Ralph was involved in some shady deals to launder drugs money via estate investments. I think they were gangsters from London, but I never met them. You see, I signed an agreement when I married Stephen. In a divorce, he didn’t have to give me anything. Ralph was insistent that he could provide for me. For us. At first, I had no idea what he was talking about. I still don’t know the details, but I think he was taking more than the usual fees in arranging their dirty deals for them.”

At that moment, a PC interrupted them. “The husband’s here and wants to see her.”

“Keep him out,” Bee said. “I’ll take the flak, if necessary, but I want a guard on Mrs. Oxbridge 24/7. The same judge who gave us the warrant will give us a restraining order against Stephen Oxbridge. He’s a suspect in the murder of Ralph Barnes and is a threat to his wife.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me,” Carol said. “I hurt him, but only because he always considered me a bauble like his Rolex, an expensive jewel hanging around to flaunt his wealth.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” Bee said. “Stay here while I make a call to Gladys.”

Given the circumstances, their DCI promised to get the restraining order against Stephen Oxbridge. She’d informed the solicitor of that when he confronted her in the lobby.

“The police are violating my civil rights!” he screamed at Bee.

She smelled the alcohol and used it as a weapon. “Settle down, counselor, or I’ll have you arrested for DUI. I’m sure they have breathalyzers here in the hospital.”

The fury turned his face red. “I’ll be talking to my personal lawyer!”

“Good luck with that. As far as I know, judges trump lawyers. Have a seat and calm down. Have a cup of coffee. I’m not allowing you to drive for the next few hours. George here will make sure of that.” She winked at the PC.

Oxbridge’s red flush turned paler, and he became meek. He found a chair and buried his head in his hands.

Bee took George aside. “Put him in handcuffs if he doesn’t behave. Who knows what else he’s had besides liquor? Meth can turn people into wild beasts.”

“Understood. It’s not every day a man gets cuckolded. I kind of feel sorry for him.”

“Save your compassion for the man’s wife. She’s had to live with this lout. Maybe not a bad sort compared to some, but he didn’t love her, that’s for sure.”

“A marriage of convenience?”

“Yes, I suppose, in a way. Not for her, though. She was still working.”

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The next order of business for Bee’s team was to find out who the mysterious “they” were. Because Bee had earned her stripes in the Big Smoke, she had some ideas. In fact, she had quite a few possible suspects.

She hated to do it: Bee called her old boss. DCI Brian Riggs was an old-fashioned copper. While never saying it in so many words, he didn’t think women should be detectives and didn’t like that they were even PCs. Bee had been both and one of Brian’s DIs before Rodney died and she transferred upriver to her current nick. The only evidence she had for this perception about the gruff old copper came in two parts: She’d usually got shittier cases than the two male DIs; and he’d defended some detectives who’d showed no respect for women, especially female suspects and witnesses, actions that were prejudicial to their cases and would have led to demotions without Brian’s support. Would he be willing to offer any help on her case?

After hearing Carol and Ralph’s story, he said, “Because I know you so well, Bee, I’ll make no comments about the husband or wife’s side of things. I’ll say something about Ralph Barnes’s shenanigans, though: Sounds like he was dealing with some dangerous gangland figures.”

“Have you had any money-laundering cases lately?” she said.

He laughed. “Having them is a lot different from making arrests and prosecuting. The gangs make a lot of money selling drugs, among other services, and like good entrepreneurs they want to invest it. Laundering comes in all shapes and sizes. In our cases, although important, it’s usually secondary to something else—dealing drugs, murders, and so forth—so we focus on

certain individuals. The NCA tries to go after the whole enterprise, but we overlap and compete a lot with them. Your case sounds like Barnes got greedy, his so-called clients investing in properties found out he was skimming, and he paid the price. End of story.”

“More or less my same line of thought.”

“Of course. I trained you well.”

Bee ignored that comment dripping with paternalistic misogyny. “Can you provide me with an updated list of players who might have been Ralph’s investors in property? My memory of them is out-of-date.”

“That’s easy enough. But you’ll be looking for their hit men. They’d never get any blood on their own hands. You’ll need the list of enforcers. They change rather frequently, I dare say. I’ll make an updated list of hit men and their affiliations and send it to you via email attachment, but you must realize there might be some new jobs around we don’t know about.”

“It will be a start and much appreciated.”

She disconnected and thought, *at least I didn’t have to grovel*. They could correlate the affiliations on Brian’s list with Ralph’s investors and zero in on possible suspects for the murder. Of course, it irked her to no end that such a list could even exist. The Yard and NCA might know who the gangsters and their minions were, but the problem was always getting enough evidence against them to put them in jail. Her team’s tasks were just beginning, but at least now they would have some specific leads.

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It took them over a week to home in on suspects. During that time, Carol Oxbridge filed for divorce and Stephen Oxbridge filed suit against the police department.

For the latter, the Super and DCI had conferred with the force’s legal representatives who told them not to worry. Stephen’s claim was a non-starter and would probably never go to court: It was based on their not serving the warrant in a timely fashion, but saving the man’s wife was an excellent excuse for not serving the warrant that they’d had in hand. Moreover, the police had already correlated Ralph’s list of clients with the affiliations indicated on DCI Riggs’ list, winnowing them down to five and showing that the search of the firm’s records was justified. That had also reduced the number of hit men who were suspects to five as well.

The divorce proceedings would take longer. In the meantime, Stephen had a restraining order and Carol a security detail with one of Carlos’s AROs and two PCs on duty at all times. Stephen would not be able to get near Carol.

While they looked for murder suspects, Bee was also investigating Stephen. She didn’t believe that he had no knowledge of Ralph’s scheme. That investigation involved looking at both Ralph and Stephen’s finances, the latter because Oxbridge might have benefitted financially from Barnes’s scheme.

For the murder suspects, Bee didn’t have a department at her more rural nick like the Met did with its CHIS service. Coppers in the Big Smoke’s conurbation upriver had to make do by finding their own snouts, individuals living and lurking in the shadows willing to grass about anything and anyone to make some spare change, that money often used for drinks or drugs but sometimes to eke out a living. She now visited some snouts, a dangerous but often necessary practice that would surely give Carlos angst. Two provided her with information about three on their list of hit men.

She had Max meet her at a pub before visiting the first man on her shortened list. He slid into the cubby opposite her.

“You look tired, Bee.”

“Long day.” She wasn’t about to explain where she’d been all afternoon. Gladys knew, had thought it was dangerous, but also agreed with Bee that it was as necessary as talking to Brian had been.

“I assume I’ll be your bodyguard. That’s ‘Mission Impossible’ if a thug has a gun, you know.” He eyed her. “And how did you find out where he is? NCA?”

“I minimize my contacts with NCA. MI5 and NCA and I aren’t on speaking terms in general. Let’s just say that some techies on our team are efficient in tracking someone down.”

“News to me. I guess I’d better perfect my own skills then. Wouldn’t want them to steal my job.”

“They won’t. Your skill set doesn’t overlap a lot with theirs. Wait person’s coming. If you don’t need a drink, I’ll settle the tab and we’ll be off.”

He looked around the seedy tavern. “Fellow could get some kind of disease here in this dive just from a bag of crisps. So, let’s go.”

“It’s just a neighborhood pub. Its seediness matches the neighborhood. Not every neighborhood in the area is a posh place frequented by the rich London diaspora. The locals who serve them can be very poor and need someplace to live and have a good time.”

“And the poverty can breed crime. I know the drill.”

She nodded. “Believe me, the Big Smoke is much worse. This area is a step above London’s poorer areas.”

The flat was in a building located in a cluster of five-story buildings that might have been new just after the war but now showed age and neglect. Dirk Grimley could supposedly be found at his bedsit, number 2D.

“Stand by the side of the door after I knock,” Bee said. Max asked why. “It’s what we do in London in a place like this, when we think a yob could be armed. He’s supposed to be a hit man, after all.” She smiled. “Of course, Mr. Grimley might not be at home.”

“I wouldn’t be. The whole building is a tip.”

“Hush. You might offend the gentleman.” She knocked and they both stepped aside.

Dirk had answered the door dressed in a bathrobe. He had a few days of stubble and bloodshot eyes. But he did turn out to be a real gentleman despite being on Bee’s list. They had tea and cakes with him; he’d just baked the teacakes. He was currently employed as a bodyguard for the owner of an amusement park. Bee wondered if that had been a gang investment, but that connection gave Dirk the perfect alibi: He’d been at a two-day long wedding and reception for the boss’s daughter that bracketed the time of Ralph’s murder.

They would confirm that, of course, but they moved on to the second person on their list.

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Tim Beasley’s abode wasn’t far away. An Indian chemist had leased four bedsits above his shop, most likely the only one for miles around. Its squalor also brought a frown to Max’s face when they inquired within. The chemist himself opened the small side door, the entrance to a stairway that went to the bedsits. Tim’s was number 4 located at the rear of the building. They went up the rickety stairs to the landing and performed the same knock-and-step-aside dance routine. This time they heard running inside and the screech from a stubborn window being opened.

“He’s making a dart out the back!” Bee yelled to Max. “Go get him, Tiger!”

But it was feint! She was waiting with ear to the door and backed away just in time as the shirtless man ran out, bowled her over, and turned towards the stairway. She rolled and tripped the wiry man, but he managed to grab the landing’s railing to prevent his fall.

She rose and looked over the railing at the dangling scrote's sweaty face. She tapped both his hands and smiled.

"You're not being very hospitable, Mr. Beasley. If you behave yourself, I won't be tempted to take a shoe off and pound on your knuckles to make you let go. Between my sergeant and I, we can pull you up. If you don't behave, you might injure yourself in the fall, maybe even break your damn neck. Your choice, sir."

"Pull me up!"

"Ah, here's my sergeant coming up the stairs now. Count yourself lucky that he's a speedy fella."

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Bee had wanted to take Tim Beasley alive and relatively unscathed so she could interrogate him, not send him to a hospital or morgue. As she walked into IR2 with Max, she noted their guest only had a duty solicitor, an old bloke she'd seen before. *Where's the gang's lawyer?*

She started the recorder and cautioned Tim. "You had drugs and a dosh in your bedsit, Mr. Beasley. Is that why you tried to do a runner? Why you attacked me?"

He smiled. "No comment." He then winked at his solicitor who responded by looking even more disinterested.

"Did the Red Dragons provide the drugs for you to sale?" Max said.

Despite the same response, that generated a flicker in the yob's expression, briefly turning the sneering smile into something else. *Fear? Guilt?*

Bee pursued that. "Who's your immediate contact in the gang? You can help your cause by telling us." She pushed a photo towards the lawyer and Tim. "Taken during your photo shoot downstairs. You're a Red Dragon. That much is clear."

"None of that's on the charge sheet," the old solicitor said, waving a wrinkled sheet of paper already stained with a coffee mug's ring. "Is your line of questioning leading to something, Inspector Berkeley?"

"There's never any evidence on an initial charge sheet," Max said. "Not here anyway. The CPS doesn't require it. We don't even have to list all the charges, only enough to hold. For example, your client could admit to a different crime to help his case, and that crime might not be on a charge sheet."

"You don't have to insult me by trying to teach me about the law, Sergeant Bloomfield. I've been doing this since you were in nappies."

Max only smiled; he also winked at the brief.

"I'm waiting, Mr. Beasley," Bee said. "Who's your contact in the Dragons? Who contracted the hit on Ralph Barnes?"

Tim jumped up. "You can't fit me for that! You've got no evidence. And why would I admit to that when it's a more serious charge than possession or selling of drugs?"

Bee smiled. Tim didn't appear to need his solicitor all that much. He'd had plenty of experience in interrogations. "Sit down," she said quietly. "I'll answer your question with a bit of science. It's something modern policing has that Sherlock Holmes didn't: Forensics evidence. Rest assured that we will find a connection between you, Mr. Barnes, and the Red Dragons. We will gather the necessary evidence to send you to prison for life. And when we do, the man who ordered the hit on Barnes will be running free, enjoying the good life, and laughing at you. Right now, we have enough on you to put you away for a long time. From your point of view, there's hardly any difference. In any case, you'll probably die in prison, a slobbering and senile old man

using nappies yourself because you no longer will have any bladder control. But pointing us to the Red Dragon who ordered the hit might give you a little bit of satisfaction if not comfort. This interrogation session is over.”

“I’d like to discuss all this with my client, if you don’t mind,” the solicitor said.

“You have twenty minutes.” She turned off the recorder.

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“I liked how you countered the solicitor’s nappies-comment with one of your own, boss,” Max said, winking at Karen who’d been behind the one-way glass watching the show.

“A small win in a big loss,” Bee said.

“Because he’s not going to grass on the contract-man?” Karen said.

“Prison time followed by a future release is better than losing your life for grassing on the big bloke,” Max said. “We need to hit him with more charges that will motivate him to grass.”

“We have forty-eight hours.” Bee glanced at her watch. “Make that thirty-five. Let’s get that evidence. Any results on the door-to-door in Beasley’s neighborhood?”

“Only that a lot of honest people around there were justly afraid of the bastard,” Karen said.

“What about the drugs angle? Narcs have anything for us there?”

Max, who’d been consulting with the Narcotics Division’s coppers, shook his head in the negative. “He’s a suspect for a lot of street action. Seems like he deals only when he doesn’t have a contract. There are gaps in the drugs activity. DS there says the contracts are probably just oral one-on-ones, by the way, so there’d be no evidence unless one of the parties admits to the murder. Fat chance of that.”

Bee mused over that. “What about OD deaths? Is there indication he’s involved in any?”

“No, or they’d have pounced on him like feral cats on a rat.”

“Okay. Query them again, just in case. Maybe a face-to-face at HQ? Karen, you and I are going to pay another visit to Dirk Grimley.”

“Why? Max told me he wasn’t involved.”

“He’d possibly found other employment that’s not associated with the Dragons. But he was one. Let’s see what Grimley knows about Beasley. Maybe Beasley took over some of Grimley’s work. It won’t hurt to find out more about that amusement park owner either. Why does he feel he needs a bodyguard?”

“What about number three on your list?” Max said.

“Good point. I’ve been focused on Grimley and Beasley. Why don’t you take DC Simpson and question Luis Silva, our number three?”

“Here’s us on our way.”

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During Bee’s return to Grimley’s abode with Karen, Max called, and Bee put it on the speakerphone in the EV. “Mr. Silva was a quick study. Met lads were taking him back to London. He’s under arrest for murder. They let me question him briefly in their wagon. Luis says he’s out of the Dragons, knows that Grimley also is, and thinks that Dirk’s lucky to have that posh job. Grimley’s boss is a Portuguese gangster, a high-class crook compared to any of the Dragons’ VIPs, who Luis refused to name.”

“So, we’ll only talk to Grimley and not his boss for now. Maybe he’ll react to a few threats that could put his posh deal in jeopardy and tell us more about Beasley or the Dragons’ VIPs.”

Grimley was still home taking it easy because the boss and his family were also recuperating from all the festivities. He switched off some rerun of a BBC detective show and gestured to the officers to sit down.

"It was quite the gala," he said as he continued the tale of the celebration. "Those Latin types can party like crazy."

Bee nodded, reading body language. *Dirk seems more amenable to a chat today!*

"He's not worried about attacks at home?" Karen said.

Grimley smiled at her. He seemed quite taken with Bee's sergeant. *Does she realize that?* She was young and could be considered a stunner, but she remained stoic. *Some women like dangerous men. She's not one of them!*

"They have a better alarm system there than 10 Downing Street, I dare say. When I'm there onsite, I'm just watching ten different CCTV screens. Any real work I do for them is when he or the family is out and about."

"Let's get past your current employer," Bee said, "and focus on your old ones, the Dragons. Do you know anything about their VIPs, past or present? Or their other hit men?"

He now laughed. "Who said I was a hit man? I'm just a poor sod who's hired muscle, and my job is to protect people. Before I left the Dragons, I mostly served as liaison between a few VIPs, as you call them, and some local players from this area. FYI: That's dangerous enough because it's like being caught between some lions and hyenas, although sometimes I wasn't sure which one was which. Fortunately, I knew my current boss from way back. I'm not saying how. He helped me clean up my act."

"So, were you a hit man for the Dragons?" Karen said.

The smile returned. Although it was still a nice smile, Bee realized it was a deceptive one. Anger was in Grimley's eyes now, and it was directed towards her sergeant.

"Let's put it another way, Dirk," Bee said. "Did you know Tim Beasley?"

"He's a low-ranking soldier for the Dragons. No class and lower than pond scum, that bloke. He'd kill his nana if he thought he could earn a few quid by doing it. You'll get no class act from that wanker. The Dragons' leaders might have trusted him, but no one else did. I thought he'd be in the king's boarding house for the long haul when he killed that kerb-crawler."

Bee tried to keep calm and maintain a neutral expression, but that last was promising. "When did that occur, Dirk? And who was the woman?"

Grimley thought a moment. "You two ladies never heard this story from me, and I'll deny it on a witness stand, but when I was still a Dragon, one of their leaders was using her to sell drugs to her clients when they wanted them. Part of the service, so to speak. One ODeD on some bad shit, and she was going to grass on that supplier. Quite the cockup, I dare say. So, Beasley was offered a tidy sum to shut her up for good. That was about seven years ago. It gave him his start."

"And you didn't go to the police with this information?"

"Got it secondhand, like, from that crowing rooster who was her supplier, no less. A lot of the Dragons are just posturing machos sitting atop all the other shite. I wouldn't have been a reliable witness. Heard it secondhand, like I said, and I was one of them, so not very believable, right? I also value my life. Besides, any defense lawyer worth his salt would tear me apart on the witness stand, making fools of the prosecutors and you plods. Happens all the time, you know. And why bother? I was higher up than Beasley and more trusted."

"And you were both in the Dragons," Bee said. "Don't you fellows swear an oath of allegiance or something?"

“Aye, but consider who’s doing the swearing. It’s a gang. Started out as a kids’ street gang and then expanded. Most Dragons are still school dropouts, and all of them are sociopaths. They’ll double-cross anyone if they think it will benefit them. Up to a certain point, of course. They always weigh their fear of death against any benefit they might receive from betraying the gang. Louis and I could get out because we had something on one of the leaders. And I had backing from my current boss. Otherwise, we’d be dead.”

“Which Dragon leader was that?” Bee said. “The one you had some dirt on?”

Grimley smiled. “Wouldn’t you like to know? He wasn’t the one in charge of the gentrification, so he wouldn’t have ordered the hit on Ralph Barnes.”

“Gentrification?” Karen said.

“Their name for moving out this way upriver from London to appear more respectable. A bit more than that because they were also laundering money from drugs sales by investing in properties. They’ll eventually run up against my boss. I know who’ll win that battle if it occurs.”

“Gentrification...?” Bee mused. “I suppose those who are gentrified still benefit from the selling of drugs in London?”

“Drugs, sex trafficking, sales of stolen liquor where taxes aren’t paid, extortion and protection schemes—you name it. It’s enough to keep the Met busy for the next decade at least, I suppose.”

“And your current boss’s business model is a bit more subtle, I suppose,” Bee said.

“The Dragons are amateurs in comparison, Detective. That’s all I’ll say.”

“Who can give us more information about the kerb-crawler’s murder? Surely you can tell us that.”

“Maybe Denise Buford. They call her Sweets. She’s kept quiet about the Dragon VIP who put out the contract on Ralph, but now that Beasley might be stitched up, she could be willing to seal a deal. That is, testify against both of them, adding to Beasley’s charges and taking out the contract-man. Offer her witness protection if she needs courage. You still do that, right?”

“We do,” Karen said. “Seems like you don’t like Beasley very much.”

“I don’t like him, and I despise the contract-man, but I don’t know which Dragon leader he is. Just like water-cooler rumors, I guess.”

“Thank you, Dirk,” Bee said. “You’ve been very helpful, and we hear your revenge motive loud and clear. We’ll respect your privacy...for now. You live a dangerous life, so we might meet again in other circumstances.”

He flashed a final toothy smile, and this time Bee saw the gold cap on a molar. “I wouldn’t have just a duty solicitor in that case, ma’am. My boss will take care of me. You can be sure of that.”

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“What do you think about all of that?” Karen said to Bee once they’d returned to their EV from the pool that still had its mirrors and tires, something they’d both worried about in the seedy neighborhood.

“I think we need to find Denise Buford. Time is of the essence. She’ll give us leverage against Beasley, probably enough to make him grass on the Dragon leader who killed the kerb-crawler and hired Beasley to do her and Ralph Barnes as well.”

They soon located Denise who lived with two other women not present at the flat. The kerb-crawler was in a robe, her hair was disheveled, and there were bruises on her face and arms. She sat on an old wing chair to face the two detectives who sat on the threadbare sofa.

“Tell us about Tim Beasley, Denise,” Bee said in as soft a voice as possible in case the woman had a hangover.

“Um, he’s not a pimp, but he has the bad habit of sampling the merchandise. ‘Determining the use-by date,’ he calls it.”

Denise had already said she didn’t know anything about Ralph Barnes. Bee had believed her, so they’d have to make do with what Grimley had said and hope that it would be enough to leverage Beasley.

“He was intent on shagging both Sally and me, and she went first. I could see the fear in her eyes. You do it with paying clients. Some are awful, others are slam-bam-thank you-ma’am, probably as dysfunctional with us as they are at home with their wives. Never any love, Inspector, just lust. But I could tell she loathed Beasley. He likes it rough, she tried to push him off, and he strangled her in an uncontrolled bout of rage. He had that rep of being rough, but that was over the top!”

“He killed her?” Karen said, even though both detectives knew from Dirk that was true. What came next was worse.

Denise wiped tears from her eyes. “He then made me help him wrap some chains around her and put her in a carpet. We tossed my friend into the river. I suppose no one has ever found her.”

“We can take a look if you can point out the spot,” Bee said. “You never know, even though it’s been seven years. But please continue.”

“Um, I’ve been looking for my chance to get even, to put him in jail for what he did. But I’m scared of him and all those who pull his puppet strings.”

“We’ll arrange to put you in witness protection,” Bee said. “What will you tell your roomies?”

“I don’t know. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Tell them that a relative has just passed on and left you some money. That you’re going off to collect it and leave this life.”

“That might work. I guess it doesn’t matter. They’ll be happy for me. I’ve ruined my life. I can’t do this anymore. And I want Beasley locked away for a long time for killing my best friend, at least until he’s old and decrepit.”

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They just made the deadline. A bit less than an hour before they had to leave Beasley to only face the charges of attacking two police officers and possessing drugs with intent to sale, possibly good for five years in jail, they handed the duty solicitor an updated charge sheet.

“‘Murder of Sally Fitzpatrick?’” the brief read. “Where did this come from, Inspector?”

Bee smiled. “Testimony we have from a witness, counselor. We’ll just call her DB to hide her identity. Sally’s murder began your client’s career with the Red Dragons.”

“I must protest. You can’t—”

“Shut up!” Beasley said to the old man. He calmed a bit and turned to Bee. “Let’s talk about what my options are. I’ve had a long career, Inspector Berkeley, and the worst I’ve done was to obey orders from just one person. But, before we get into details, what can you offer me? I want a sentence that’s as minimal as possible. Certainly not life without parole.”

“All we can do is put into the record that you were willing to cooperate with us. The CPS will consider that when they pass final charges on to the Crown Court.” She eyed the fidgety attorney for a moment but returned her attention to Beasley. “Now, did that one person order you to kill Sally?” He nodded. “And Ralph?” Another nod.

*Success!* Bee thought. They wouldn't need Grimley. But they would still need the name of the Dragons' VIP who'd ordered both hits. They had to press on.

"For the record, the suspect admits to his involvement in the murder of Sally Fitzpatrick and Ralph Barnes. Now, Mr. Beasley, we need some details."

He turned to his solicitor. "Do you think you can manage to monitor the remainder so I don't have to dig myself a deeper hole than necessary?"

The lawyer turned red but nodded.

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Bee walked Denise Buford to the witness-protection vehicle, an old Morris no one would pay any attention to. Carlos would be her driver and bodyguard. She'd no longer be known as Sweets or even Denise Buford.

Bee hugged her. "You're going to be okay, Miss Williams. Keep your head down and get adapted and comfortable in your new life. Stay away from the drugs and sex trade. Maybe you can find a nice bloke who treats you right. In any case, you have a chance to turn your life around. Don't blow it."

"I won't, Inspector. I promise. And I'll forever be in your debt for giving me this chance."

"And thank you again for putting Beasley and the Dragon VIP away for a long time. We chip away at the criminal elements little by little. I wish we could have jailed all the Red Dragons, but someone told us they're really amateurs. A day of reckoning might come for them as well, even without our intervention."

"There'll just be more gangs to take their place. And worse. Most people can avoid all that. I'm among the few who got roped in. That's common enough, I suppose."

"It is, and it makes our work difficult. But sometimes we win one, like in your case, and that makes the fight seem worthwhile. Good luck, Jacqueline Williams."

"I'll make my own luck, Bee. That's something I have to do. It's on me." She got in the car, and Carl and Jacky drove off.

Bee waved at the receding vehicle. *I bet you'll make your own luck*, she was thinking. *I know you will.*

## The Retired English Constable

Roger Hammond often read the trash: Mostly old newspapers but also sometimes circulars, ads, old store receipts, and other items flying around in the park and its surrounding streets near his home. Newspapers always piqued his interest; he couldn't afford to buy them, and he preferred them to news on the telly because the latter was mostly superficial and lacked details, at least enough for his tastes. The other items generally had to have something that caught his eye—colorful patterns, unusual type fonts, or some local politician's mug shot that he recognized.

He sat on a park bench one sunny Friday morning after his walk, reading a circular announcing an upcoming protest to be held the following day in that same park. What had attracted him were the colors, mostly reds, and the angry eagle symbol. Or was it a vulture? That took him back to that day long ago when his mum and he had visited his grandfather in Birmingham. The old man had showed Roger his collection of WWII memorabilia that he'd brought back from Germany.

He almost tossed the circular—the protest planned for Saturday morning was against the government and organized by some far-right group, so he had no sympathies for it—but on the back a name and local phone number were written. He recognized the man's name because he and his mate Sam had saved the man's life back when Roger was a constable and Sam Prince was an EMT.

Sam had given the SOB CPR. Just part of the job, but the arse had tried to sue the police, saying that Roger had sexually attacked him, as if holding the screaming wanker as Sam applied a tourniquet was the action of a sexual predator. That arse had later become a famous man. *Figures*, Roger thought. *The higher up you go, the more sociopathic the powerful become.* Roger had to smile at that bit of psychobabble. He'd hated it as a copper.

He decided to add the circular to the mostly valueless collection he'd inherited from his grandfather. He folded it and placed it in his coat pocket, his thoughts already turning to his coming night at the pub with his mate Sam. Nearly every Friday night for decades, Sam and Roger would visit *The Wild Stag*, a traditional pub not far from the park or their house.

Sam had been an EMT almost as long as Roger had been a constable, so their paths often crossed, and they'd become close friends and drinking mates. Their wives had too, more for friendship than drinking, and the four of them had enjoyed many good times together as well. Roger had lost Ellie to cancer; Sam had lost Kate to a stroke. So, it had been natural that when Sam's daughter and her brood moved back into the family home, much smaller than Ellie and Roger's, Sam and Roger would become roomies. In fact, the daughter and her husband had basically booted Sam out!

Some thought Roger and Sam were two old gay blokes, which amused them both to no end. They would sometimes have fun pretending they were—nothing more than holding hands, but that got people's tongues wagging and was good for a lot of laughs.

The perceptions people had often amused them. Sam could talk and act like a doctor; Roger would sometimes lapse into Scottish or Cumbrian dialect to confuse people, or curse like a gangster from Liverpool. It was all about having fun together, and not all of it was at people's expense.

*Maybe we'll come back to the park tomorrow to laugh at the idiots at the protest and pretend we're fellow Nazis?* He then had second thoughts, thinking some of his old colleagues might be there to round up any thugs who made trouble. *Or participate in the event?*

Roger would mention the protest to Sam at the pub that night to get his take on it. At least they'd have something to laugh about! No doubt about it: The country was going to the dogs, and some of them were neo-Nazis!

He looked at his watch. It was time to return home and prepare lunch for the two of them. Sam would soon be back from his cardiologist's appointment. He'd already had two stents put in, and Roger thought he might need another. *If the job doesn't kill you, genetics will.* Both Sam's parents had died from a heart attack.

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They were both feeling the effects of their night of tipping when they walked home from the pub early the next morning. They passed by the same park where Roger had sat almost twenty-four hours earlier, still chatting about what wankers the neo-Nazis were. There'd been a few at the pub, rough, tattooed lads who were drinking heavily, every other word a curse, but they'd behaved themselves by not involving the pub's other customers.

At one edge of the park, Roger interrupted their friendly banter and said, "Ale's going right through me, mate. Let me take a piss behind that bush."

Sam laughed. "Go ahead, old man. I'll wait. Maybe some neo-Nazi will sit in the puddle during the protest later."

Roger went behind the bush, thinking the ex-EMT's humor had always been a bit coarse at times and focused a lot on bodily functions, especially when he pretended he was a doctor; but Roger shared the sentiment. *Grandpa fought the Nazis, and now they and other fascist thugs are fucking up the world again.* He tried to put such wankers out of his mind as he did his business.

He was interrupted by the sounds of a row—grunts and groans from fighting men put his old copper's senses on alert. *Sam?* By the time he could zip up and come out from behind the bush, the row had ended. Sam was on the ground with a knife in his chest, and his assailant was running away.

As he approached his best friend's body, Roger knew Sam was dead. Instincts kicked in. He checked the carotids for life signs. *Nothing!* He then pulled out his mobile and punched in 999. After talking to a duty sergeant at the local nick, he then lost it as the reality of the situation smacked him in the face. He sunk to his knees and bawled like a baby. *Ellie, Kate, and now Sam! Lord, what did I do to deserve this?*

Two PCs appeared first on scene. They took five minutes top to take his statement, a short summary of what had occurred; it took longer than necessary because he'd interrupt with more sobbing.

One constable then started to cordon off that area of the park while the other made several calls. Soon another zebra arrived with its blues and twos, adding two more PCs, and then a van filled with four SOCOs came to collect forensics evidence.

By that time, Roger was sitting on that same bench he'd been on that morning, rocking back and forth, muttering to himself, and knowing that now he was all alone in the world.

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DI Bee Berkeley put down her coffee mug and took the call.

"Are you at the boarding house or at work?" Max Bloomfield, her young DS said.

"Headed for work as soon as I finish my morning coffee."

"I'll save you some traveling time then. We have the case of a victim of a knife attack." He told her the streets intersecting the park nearest the crime scene, a small park, "...without swings," he added, making a reference to a previous case. "It's walkable from the boarding house."

“I have a pool car. I’ll drive it there. Any ID for the victim?”

Max repeated most of Roger’s summary of what had happened. “PCs have a FLO on the way to console the wrinklie friend of the victim, and we won’t have much use for a pathologist: TOD and COD are already determined well enough. SOCOs are already here too. Once the scene is under control, I’ll ask the FLO to take Mr. Hammond back to his house. He’s really shaken.”

*Who wouldn’t be?* she thought, even though she didn’t yet know all the details about the witness and victim’s relationship. “I’ll be there in five to ten. Watch for the vultures.” She was referring to the media rats. She hung up and sighed. *Another murder. Maybe I am a jinx!*

Carlos picked that moment to enter the kitchen. “Work call?”

“The worst kind: another murder. I’m thinking I’ve jinxed our little substation.”

“The economy and the way the Tories are handling it have a lot of people stressed out, including the scrotes. The geopolitical situation isn’t comforting to anyone either. Even the weather is freaking people out, and wankers are taking advantage. Sign of the times, *chiquita*. There’s no jinx. Just human nature.”

Bee would only appear small standing next to the big Armed Response Officer who was a gentle man but a good one to have on your side when confronting violent criminals, especially armed ones. The ARO was also one sexy bloke who had stolen her heart and cured her loneliness. For the second time in her life, she had a handsome lover.

“Thank you, but I’ve heard rumors.”

“Does anyone not appreciate your leadership qualities?”

“Nobody more than the usual, old male coppers who will always resent having a woman in charge, but Gladys cured most of the ones in my team of that attitude even before I arrived.”

“Bless her soul, and there you go. No jinx, no serious complaints.” He poured coffee into his own mug. “I suppose you’re off to pursue the bad guys and protect the innocents. I’m going to take a leisurely shower ‘cause I’m a bit sore. You were a tigress last night, *chiquita*. No complaints about that either, though.” He flashed a lecherous smile. “The only thing I have waiting for me at the station is a bunch of damn reports to write.” He gave her a coffee-flavored kiss. “Just stay safe out there. There are too many people who don’t like the police.”

She knew he was referring to her first case. When newly arrived at the scene of the crime, someone had tried to kill her with a few rifle shots. She always tried to look at the positives, though: That’s when she’d met Carlos for the first time.

“Let’s hope paperwork is all you’ll have,” she said, returning the kiss. She tugged at the towel wrapped around his waist. “Wish I could stay for a quickie.”

“We’ll make up for it later. Let’s give our friend down there a chance to recover.”

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By the time she arrived at the crime scene, everyone was there who should be. Max was controlling everything, although that looked more like chatting up a young SOCO, a blond version of Max. *Has he already broken up with his last love interest? Get a life, Max!*

“Where’s the victim’s drinking mate?”

“On his favorite park bench.” Max pointed to where Roger was sitting with the Family Liaison Officer. “That’s Jeremy Kirk, sometimes FLO, but also a reliable DC when we need him in a pinch.”

She nodded. “Good combo. I’ll go talk to them. Then I suppose we’d better get Mr. Hammond home. Can you continue to direct traffic here?”

“Sure. I already have some PCs knocking on doors, and some DCs at the nick are looking for security-cam footage. Roger didn’t see the knife fight.”

“Completely one-sided, from what I heard, and hopefully a security cam didn’t capture why he was occupied. I can imagine what the boys at the nick would say about old people and their bladders.”

“He’d totally ignore that. He’s an ex-copper.”

“Really? From here?”

“Next county over towards Oxford, just over the line. He lived here, though. Nearby, in fact. Walked to most everything with his mate Sam.”

“Any chance those two old men were the ones fighting?”

“You can talk to Roger. My take is that either he can lie much better than that damn American ex-president, or he and the the victim were tighter than Romulus and Remus.” Max’s background in classic studies often made a colorful appearance at unusual times. “Lifetime mates. Sam Prince was an EMT, by the way.”

“Interesting. Your two Romans were identical twins raised by wolves, by the way. And wolves can be dangerous.”

“So could that damn American ex-president. So what? Anyway, talk to old Roger. He’s one of the good blokes.”

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Jeremy had calmed Roger down enough so that Bee could sit on the other side of him on the park bench and ask a few questions.

“Back in my day, a lovely lady like you could never become a detective inspector. Seeing you, Inspector Berkeley, makes me want to go back to work again. That’s how I met Sam.”

“It’s just Bee, especially for a colleague. My sergeant explained some of that history. I know you spoke to Max a bit, but could you talk me through what occurred again.”

“Um, that’s a bit hard. Sam was my best friend, a drinking mate for decades, he was. We’d left *The Wild Stag* and were walking by this park on our way back to our place—he lives with me now because his daughter basically evicted him from his own house, the old family home—when Mother Nature gave me a call. I ducked behind that bush over there but soon heard a row going on. By the time I got around to see what the hell was going on, Sam was dead on the ground and his attacker was doing a runner, disappearing ‘round the corner down the street there.”

“You didn’t see the fight but heard them yelling?” Roger agreed with a nod. “Remember any words from either one?”

Roger’s face turned sad and pale, and a few tears rolled down his cheek. “My mate was yelling, ‘Sam! Sam!’ And I couldn’t help him, ma’am.”

“And the attacker?”

Roger paused a moment to think. “The yob was yelling, ‘Where is it, you wrinklie bastard!’ Um, I forgot to tell your sergeant that.” He tapped his head. “I’m a bit forgetful now.”

“No problem. You told me. Considering the circumstances, you earn my approval for remembering all that you did. Anything else?”

“Lots of groans, grimaces, and screams of pain, from both. Even though Sam was just an EMT, he wasn’t a pushover when it came to a fight. Saw that myself in a few brawls at our pub when some lout got a bit too much courage from his drink. And Sam has a temper, he does. Doesn’t talk much with his daughter now. She’s a woman like the one in that Dylan song.”

“Someone from a Dylan Thomas poem?”

“No, no, a Bob Dylan song: ‘A Hard-Headed Woman.’ That’s Rebecca, Sam’s daughter. Her hubby wanted to build a first-floor extension onto the old family house just for Sam, but

Becca didn't want to waste the money. Said he'd be dead soon enough anyway and that building it would lower the place's resale value, as if that house were some kind of toff's mansion! Good thing I was willing to let him stay with me. Maybe she knew that, like. Worked well for us in the long run, not that he or I thanked her for it."

Bee nodded. "Can you think of anyone who'd want to kill Sam?"

Roger shook his head in the negative. "While a few might enjoy having a go at me because I nicked them, Sam aided and saved a lot of people in his work."

"The killer's words might indicate he thought Sam had something the killer wanted. Any idea what that could be?"

"Certainly not money. Yob didn't even nick Sam's wallet or steal his jewelry. I checked. After the pub trip, he wouldn't have been carrying much cash anyway, but his watch and gold chain are valuable. I could see he had all three."

"You touched his body?"

"No, Inspector. I was a copper too many years to do something that stupid. He carried the wallet in his sports coat; I could still see the bulge where it was. The watch and chain were visible. Old Sam liked to dress up a bit to go for drinks." Roger jerked a thumb towards himself. "Me, without my Ellie, I just don't bother anymore."

"What about the knife? The handle's a bit ornate. Ever seen one like that?"

"Ivory with inlaid silver. Snooty continental tastes, I'd imagine. Maybe Italian? I suggest that your sergeant take a picture of it and search for something like it on some computer database. He's a young bloke and probably can use the infernal things."

She smiled and shot him a flirty twinkle. "Are you saying I can't?"

"Um, no insult intended, but I don't know. I retired before everyone went crazy with those damn machines. Every copper must have one on his desk now." He showed her his mobile. "Here's the only computer I have and maybe need, and I don't know how to use ninety percent of the shite on it. Just before I retired, my nick assigned me one. I tried to use it and got this one when I left because Ellie liked hers so much. Can't say I use it a lot."

"But it was fortunate that you had it to call 999."

"Could have done that with my old flip phone. Carried that in my auto, though, just for emergencies, so I wouldn't have had it here this morning. Pain in the arse it was too."

"Okay, Roger, I'm sorry for your loss but happy you're safe. Jeremy will walk you home and stay with you just in case Sam's killer returns."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because you two old blokes look enough alike that you could be brothers."

Roger thought about that a moment. "Um, Ellie always said exactly that same thing, but I couldn't see it. Thought it was a bit like people saying that all Asians look alike. Something we called stereotyping in the force. Too many folks create pigeonholes to shove groups of people into. Human nature, I guess."

"I'm not doing anything like that. What I'm referring to is often caused by people seeing two blokes together a lot. I'm what's called an unbiased observer. Your mate looked like you and vice versa, enough to confuse a stupid yob in the dim light this morning."

Roger pointed to the eastern horizon. "Some red over there now. Pub stops serving at three, but we can hang around and finish our drinks. We did just that, but by the time we got here, the sun was deciding to make an appearance."

"With the usual fog from the Thames. And a lack of streetlamps to dispel it."

The old copper nodded. "Okay. I see what you're saying. So, maybe whatever he was looking for, he thought I had it, but maybe confused Sam with me. In other words, it should be me lying over there with a fancy knife in my chest."

"Don't look at it that way. While it's a possibility, it could just be fate."

"Bad luck for Sam; good luck for me. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

That ended the conversation. She wished she hadn't broached her theory. *You're getting old, Bee Berkely. That's a rookie's mistake!*

"Don't worry, Roger. We will find who killed your mate." *Another mistake, and the old copper would know that as one!* She realized that her lack of sleep that night might be getting to her. *But Carlos is such a turn on.* He made her feel like a young woman.

As Jeremy walked away with Roger, Bee pitied the old man. He'd be alone in the world now. She made a mental note to keep checking on him in some way.

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Bee spent another ten minutes or so at the crime scene, mostly annoying the SOCOs and Gwen the pathologist with questions to help seal her reputation as an investigator who wanted to know all the details about a crime. When she was sure everything was sorted and in control, she sent Max back to the station to prove or disprove her hunch that the unique murder weapon was significant. She then decided to visit Jeremy and Roger to see if the old man was holding it together and would be safe at his home, which sounded like a large place to secure, not to mention how it would now seem lonely for the old copper without his friend Sam.

As she pulled up in the pool's little EV, Jeremy came rushing out from behind the house. "I just called for the SOCOs, boss! When we arrived, we found that the house had been broken into and everything in it was strewn about."

Bee frowned. "Did you check all the rooms?" That would be the natural thing to do, but Jeremy struck her as an experienced copper. He'd know that he should preserve the crime scene.

"No, Inspector. We were sitting on the back patio, waiting for the SOCOs. I didn't want him surprising a thief that might still be inside. He's keen on seeing what's been stolen, though."

"Understood. Go keep him company again. I'll give a quick look-around inside and yell if I need you. By the way, how do you know every room was tossed?"

"Could be only the ground floor," he said with a sheepish grin. "We looked through the windows when we saw the front door ajar."

"Good man. It's smart to be careful unless you've called an ARU. Also smart to preserve the scene for the SOCOs." She pulled rubber gloves and Tyvek booties from her purse, the one Carlos called her "black hole," implying that most anything could be sucked into it and found there as needed. Someday she would have to invest in a backpack, but a heavy purse could also serve as a weapon. She'd used one like that in London several times. "I assume the SOCOs will arrive as soon as they finish at the first crime scene. They were almost done there. Calm poor Roger's nerves. He has a problem now, though. We'll talk about that later."

Her tour through the house was an eye-opener. Roger and Sam had a nice stereo and widescreen telly downstairs in the large, comfortable sitting room made to seem small because of a wide assortment of chairs, sofas, and tables, perhaps evidence for the men combining their belongings when Sam had moved in. That telly was askew as if someone had peered behind it. Cushions from the chairs and sofas had been sliced apart and drawers left open, their contents scattered on the floor.

When she moved upstairs, there was more evidence for a haphazard combination of two men's belongings. Their bedrooms each had had a smaller telly on the wall, and the third

bedroom that had become a study had two non-matching desks and chairs and yet another sofa, this one for two people, all with similar damage as below, and another telly. All the tellys had been taken from the wall and placed on the floors.

Moving the tellys but not stealing them indicated those responsible might have been looking for a wall safe. The other chaos could indicate that whatever they'd been looking for might be small. *Jewels? Ledgers? Loose papers? What had been the object of the search?*

Her mind immediately returned to what Sam's attacker had been yelling. He wasn't a thief either—he'd not taken Sam's jewelry—and those who'd visited the house didn't seem to be common thieves either. Going through the house must have taken some time. Had it occurred when the two men were at the pub? How would the scrotes know they were there? Had they been there and left for the house when Roger and Sam arrived for drinks?

She returned to ground level and found her way through to the dining room, also in a shambles, and into the kitchen, which was in the worst shape of any room in the house. It all seemed eerily like their last case involving the estate lawyer, at least at that moment. The back door led to the back patio. Throwing gloves and booties into a convenient trash bin, she joined Jeremy and Roger outside.

"The whole house was trashed, Roger, downstairs and upstairs. I'm sorry. No one inside, though." That was more evidence that the trashing had occurred when the men were at the pub. *Finding nothing, had one of them gone after Sam at the park? Or Roger? What are they looking for?*

"What will I do? The police will seal off my home for tonight at least, and it will take me days to put things in order after that."

"Not to mention the fact that you shouldn't be here alone, and even the two of you, you and Jeremy, can't really secure a place this size."

"That's why I installed an alarm system before Sam even came to live with me. We two arthritic old men couldn't secure it either. But after he came, I didn't think it was a good idea to sell it. I'd thought about that after Ellie passed."

"I saw the alarm system. Front and kitchen door only, no windows, and no interior sensors. No front or back video, not even here in the patio that's a logical entry point because of the back road. Your house would be a thief's easy target even with your alarm system. And did you leave the alarm set when you and Sam left for the pub?"

Roger looked sheepish. "I don't remember. We've never had a problem." He shook his head. "Some ex-copper, right?"

"Two heads are better than one, though. Sam must have had experience with robbery victims, I'm guessing. I'm worried about you, Roger. I can't let you stay here alone or with Jeremy even with the alarm system. Let me see if I can work on some alternative. You and Sam had a lot of nice things, but whoever was here didn't take them. They didn't steal Sam's expensive jewelry either. They were definitely looking for something else."

"I can't imagine what. Did they muck around with my grandfather's memorabilia?"

"World War II artifacts?" He nodded. "They're strewn on the floor in your study among a lot of other things. You'll have to make an inventory, Roger. Eventually. Not now. I might be wrong. Maybe they did steal something, and you'll be able to determine that, but, if I'm right about the timeline, I doubt they took anything from the house."

"Timeline, Inspector?"

"Was there anyone at the pub watching you two after you arrived there, Roger, or looking suspicious? I think your place was trashed while you walked there and enjoyed your drinks."

Jeremy looked surprised, but both he and Roger nodded.

"That could be," Roger said. "I'm trying to remember who was there at the pub. I think we only chatted with the publican and the server. We're regulars. Were." He looked sad. "Don't know if I'll ever return to *The Wild Stag* now."

Bee took Jeremy aside. "You'll have to stay here with Roger until I work out where he can stay. Even the food in the kitchen was spoiled."

"What's your plan?"

"Long term, I think he should sell the house and move into a local retirement community. I'm new here; so are you. But I know someone who isn't: Gladys, our DCI."

"Aye, I bet she has some connections or knows of a place or two."

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After the SOCOs showed up at the house—they'd have more of a challenge at this crime scene—Bee left Jeremy with Roger and returned to the station, promising to get back to Jeremy with something to help the old man. Fortunately, the DCI wanted an update, mostly because the media dogs were hounding her for information.

After going through all they knew so far and not dwelling on any wild guesses or theories, Bee explained Roger's problem. "Neither Jeremy nor I feel he's safe at his house. Given what happened to Sam, these thugs will do anything, maybe even torture Roger, to find what they're looking for."

"And end up killing him like Sam because he can't think of anything," Gladys said. "He really shouldn't be all alone in an insecure dwelling."

"Any other house where he'd be all alone would still be a problem. I think he should be in a retirement community. I've seen them advertised: Basically, multiple buildings containing flats but with services for the elderly person, or persons, if living together, medical, exercise, dining, cleaning, and so forth. I'm not from this area. Do you know about such a place?"

Gladys smiled. "You came to the right person. My sister Marjorie is the manager of one." She described the place that was about seven miles away on old farmland.

"Sounds perfect. Can Roger make an appointment with Marjorie? Jeremy could drive him there."

"I'll try to set it up. I think, if Roger's willing, they can do most everything to get Roger sorted there, even getting an estate agent for his house and arranging the move of whatever he wants to take with him. Obviously, he won't have room for everything in that house. That's hard for any wrinklie who's scaling down."

Bee thought of her own move, hard for her even though she wasn't elderly. She'd decided to sell a lot of furniture and the remainder she couldn't part with was now in storage until she found a more permanent place. *With Carlos? Time will tell.*

"I think we should let Marjorie, Jeremy, and Roger sort all that. I have a murder to solve."

"Agreed. But I'll give my sister a call. I'm sure she'll help Roger out."

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After talking to Gladys, Bee went to the open-plan area where most of her team members had desks to find Karen and Max. "It looks like both Sam's killer and the yobs who tossed the house were looking for something. We need to know what. Until we have forensics from the house, which I'm not too hopeful about, I want to focus on who was at the pub with Roger and Sam."

"What about the knife?" Max said.

“And the park?” Karen said.

“Okay, one at a time. Max?”

“Not much to say. It’s fake Nazi memorabilia anyone can buy on the internet, for whatever reason. Whether it’s meaningful or not, a lot of people might have a knife like that, and the company that makes them is probably getting rich. They’re lethal double-edged daggers, in any case, and faithful copies of standard SS weapons. And that relates to what Karen found out.”

“The SOCOs were barely packing up when organizers for a protest at that very park showed up. Skinheads, Bee. Neo-Nazi fanatics. They’re staging a government protest as we speak.”

Bee frowned. “Do we have PCs there?”

“From multiple nicks, all with protective vests and truncheons. They’re hoping there’s no violence, but they’re still there for crowd control.”

She thought a moment. “Vest and truncheons might not be enough. Maybe we should put some ARUs there?”

Max laughed. “That might stir up those thugs even more.”

“Why there? At that park?”

“Council didn’t want them in town,” Karen said. “I’m afraid they’ll overflow the park, though. Add curiosity seekers to the mix of thugs who’ll be there might mean trouble for nearby residences.”

“Does Gladys know about this?”

“VIPs from several counties have been trying to prepare. Both our Gladys and Super are involved, but you know how ad hoc committees are.”

“Why did she keep us in the dark?”

“I suppose she thought it was more about crowd control, which PCs normally should be able to handle.”

Bee nodded. “I can see their logic. But here’s mine: The two of you should go to that park and mingle a bit. I don’t think it’s coincidence that Sam was killed with a fake Nazi knife. Perhaps one of the old men saw something they shouldn’t have.”

“Maybe Sam?” Max said. “But you think they were looking for something too?”

“So maybe they also found something. We have a very bad description of Sam’s killer—Roger only saw him at a distance—but I’m betting he’s somehow connected to this protest group. Listen and watch, but don’t get involved in any melees. Let the PCs and AROs handle that. I’m going to visit *The Wild Stag* to have a chat with the publican.”

“Won’t some of those neo-Nazis be there?” Karen said.

“In and out, I suppose, with the protest going on. I want to know who was there last night. Someone knew that Roger and Sam wouldn’t be home.”

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Garth “Gary” Cassidy was as Irish as they came. He was polishing glasses when Bee arrived. After some brief introductions during which she showed her warrant card, he said, “Was wondering when you plods would show up. Heard about poor Sam. I’d have expected something like that to happen today, you know. My usual lunchtime blokes aren’t here. I’m guessing they were all curious about the damn protest going on today. ‘Course, you’ll be asking who was here last night.”

“That’s correct,” she said with a smile. “In particular, were there any customers who were eyeing Roger and Sam?”

“Those two are part of the local crowd, but only on Fridays. That’s about a dozen tipplers or so, not including them. No one suspicious in that group, but some of them can get rowdy at times.” He made a fist and flexed the muscle in his right arm. “Sometimes I multitask as a bouncer. Give the rowdies a swift kick in the arse and send them home. Some of those old English boys can’t hold their drink as well as my people.”

She laughed. “I know for a fact that your self-critical stereotype isn’t all that true.”

He smiled. “My old man back in Belfast was a publican too. He depended on that job. But back to your question. There were four strangers I wouldn’t have wanted to tangle with. Quiet like. Minded their own business. So, I couldn’t complain. Got the impression they were here for what’s going on at the park today.”

“Why was that?”

“Scruffy-looking thugs they seemed. Had scars and tattoos: Eagles, double-eights, swastikas.”

“Neo-Nazis you mean. But what’s with the double-eights?”

“I think it’s code for HH. *Heil Hitler*. Our own brand, I guess, not the current French, German, Hungarian, or Italian variety. Not from Eastern Europe either, like some of those we’ve welcomed into the UK. All the four spoke like born Londoners, in fact.”

“Like me?” she said with a smile and a wink.

“No, Inspector. If you’re from the Big Smoke, you don’t show it so much in your speech. Theirs was pure Cockney for the most part.”

“Maybe they’d finished their plans for the protest and were celebrating?”

“Could be. They were serious about their drinking, in any case. One was eyeing old Roger and Sam, though. Maybe made them as plainclothes coppers like you. Roger was a constable, Sam was an EMT, but they both had that look of authority. ‘Course, Roger and Sam were studying them too, not liking much what they saw, I’m guessing.”

“Do you think one of them picked a fight with Sam later?”

“Each group seemed to be more concentrated on their ales. Roger and Sam were curious about the strangers, but the four seemed well-behaved and not wanting to pick a fight with two old men.”

Bee obtained a good description of each member of the quartet. None matched Roger’s description of Sam’s assailant, but Roger had only seen him from a distance. “Anything else about those four?”

“They left at last call. Peacefully, without complaints. Roger and Sam hung around to finish their drinks.” Cassidy paused a moment in thought. “The thin, tall fellow was on his moby more than the others and looked a bit agitated at times. Not with his mates but with whoever was on the other end of the conversation. I wrote that all off as his planning for today’s event.”

“Did you know about that event before today?”

“Sure. They’d been handing out circulars for two weeks. I have several copies. Quite colorful. Want one?”

“If you don’t mind.”

Cassidy reached under the counter and then handed a letter-sized page to her. “Lot of fancy script and images if you ask me. My supply comes from those that people tossed on my front walk. Had to keep picking up so the *Stag* didn’t look like a tip. Put ’em all in the bin. Sorry ‘bout the coffee and ale stains.”

She examined the circular for a moment, wondering how Karen and Max were making out at the protest. *Are the four from the pub in that crowd?* She handed Cassidy a card. “Thanks,

Gary. You have a cozy, welcoming place. A bit far from where I live, but I'll keep it in mind. I hate the new sports bars."

"Sure. You and yours are always welcome here. Bring your hubby. Saturdays we have dart games. Not tonight, though. I'm expecting those wankers from the park to pay me a visit. Might be trouble."

"I can advertise your place to all the local plods, although they probably already know about it from when Roger was a PC. As for the park people, I'll have some of the PCs there pass by here from time to time to make sure everything's under control. Call me or the station if you see that quartet again. I'd like to have a little chat with them."

"Sure thing. And thanks for offering some protection from those neo-Nazis. I went through the Troubles as a lad, and those four seemed like trouble with a capital T."

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Outside *The White Stag*, Bee called Karen. "Everything okay over there?"

She could barely hear her sergeant over the raucous din at the park when Karen replied. "I've never heard so many lies and vile words about the government in my life. King Charlie's receiving a lot of insults too. But so far, they're just angry and noisy wankers. Our colleagues are milling around and being very discreet."

"Good. Maybe it will all be a storm in a teacup. Is the park full?"

"People are still arriving. We haven't seen anyone who matches Roger's description."

"Okay. Also be on the lookout for four others." She repeated Cassidy's description of the quartet from the pub. "Don't approach them, but I'd like to know if they're there. I'm off to see how old Roger is doing."

When she pulled up to Roger's house, Jeremy was sitting on the front porch. "Roger's inside putting together a travel kit. Gladys's sister is giving him temporary lodging for now. It'll give him a chance to see if he likes the residences."

"Nice of her to do that. Can you drive him? I don't want him to be alone."

"You're the boss." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the park. They could hear boos and cheers from the crowd and muzzled words from a PA system even at Roger's place. "Seems like there's a lot more action over that way."

"And a lot of police presence for crowd control."

At that moment, Roger exited the house with a paper in hand, looking very puzzled. From the colors, Bee saw he was holding one of the circulars. "I see you collected a memento of the protest."

"'Twas in the park yesterday morn'. I was going to add it to my grandfather's memorabilia to show him up there that people down here are still fuckin' crazy."

"Were you missing any of his stuff?"

"No, but I'd forgotten about this circular. I'd folded it up and put it in my coat pocket. This here's my walkin' and travelin' coat."

"I see. You should put that paper with the other memorabilia if you want to keep it. There are so many littering everywhere, that one could well end up in the trash as well."

"Aye, but I'm now thinking this one's significant. Only a gut feeling from an old copper maybe not worth much. Look at what's on the back." He handed her the paper.

She recognized the name but not the phone number; the former had been in the press recently. She'd looked up who her representative in Parliament would be when she moved out of London; Christopher Mullens was the local MP. *Is a local VIP involved with neo-Nazis? Would he have someone murdered to maintain that secret?* "I think this must be what they were looking

for, Roger. Let me show this to my DCI. She'll have to approve our visit to talk with the honorable MP Christopher Mullens."

"Bollocks! That old bloviating bastard isn't honorable at all. Sam saved his life once, and nary a thank you from him was ever heard. But this might mean nothing," Roger said, his eyes bright, "yet if this wanker murdered my mate, I want him in prison."

"I'll keep you informed, Roger." She took Jeremy aside after Roger got himself and his kit sorted inside the FLO's car. "I'm going to order a PC watch on Roger during his stay at the residence. I hope I'm over-reacting and that our DCI's sister won't mind, but we need some AROs there as well in case there's any chance this clue is meaningful. Be watchful during the trip and stay with Roger until the PCs and AROs make an appearance."

"Understood. This sounds like spook stuff." Jeremy noted her raised eyebrows. "MI5, Inspector."

"Once again, it's Bee, just Bee. And try to avoid talking about MI5. We have some bad history with them."

"That's why I thought of them, Inspector. Um, Bee."

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After getting Gladys's approval, Bee called both Karen and Max back to the station. After they arrived, she asked Karen to find out everything she could about Mullens and his political career. Not being from his district originally, Bee didn't know all that much. On her way to the MP's residence with Max, Karen called with some initial data about the MP.

"He's got more money than God because he owns an electronics firm that lives off government contracts. He's definitely a Tory much farther to the right than even the Iron Lady was, Bee. He's had to take back some admiring comments he made about that crazy American ex-president and that wild Israeli PM. He practices a lot of that old Orwellian double-speak, is anti-refugee, anti-immigrant, anti-gay, and anti-monarchy, the latter being unusual for a Tory. I'm surprised voters in the district still vote for him."

"Most just vote the party line, and this district is more upscale than most, so there are probably more Tories around, I suspect."

"Um, I guess I do that too. For Labour. But who can keep up with all those political pillocks?"

Max laughed. Karen would hear it because she was on speakerphone. "I'm with him about the monarchy. They're just parasites."

*But you're probably not anti-gay*, Bee thought. "Any form on Mr. Mullens? Roger told us that Sam saved his Tory arse once."

"Single-car highway accident years ago. Damn fool drove off the road into a ditch. There's form for DUI. He'd be a spoiled rich kid back then. Maybe Roger was the one who arrested him?"

"But no form for violent political activism?"

"Beyond the DUI, nothing. There are some newspaper articles about near brawls in Parliament, even with his own party members."

Bee nodded. That's where she'd seen his name. "Nice fellow. What about neo-Nazi associates?"

"If there are any, it's a secret."

"Okay, thanks Karen." She disconnected and turned to Max. "Do you think I'm Alice chasing the rabbit down the rabbit hole, Mr. Classicist?"

He smiled. "Actually, the adventures of Alice were written at Oxford, so they might be considered children's classics. All I can say is that we must eliminate Mullens as a player. He might only be a cowardly but bloviating lion, to continue the metaphor, so we should get a better feel for him by meeting him. He's certainly not the cute and fluffy rabbit from the Disney version."

"Yes, we must have an open mind. But FYI: You're my bodyguard. Cassidy, the publican, is a big fellow like Carlos, and he's still reluctant about tangling with some of those neo-Nazi brutes."

"I'd be surprised if they weren't ex-military too, like Carlos and I are. Unless they're armed, though, I'm your man."

She nodded. Max knew a lot about martial arts. Sometimes he and Carlos would spar together. She thought that was just a lot of sweaty, macho posturing, but she recognized those skills could be useful.

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The butler left them in the sitting room, went to announce their arrival to his master, and then returned to ask them to follow him. Towards the rear of the house, they came to an ornate wooden door. The butler knocked and a gruff voice called out, "Come!"

They entered a traditional English study complete with comfortable sofa and wingchair for leisure reading near the fireplace and a solid oak desk to match the built-in bookshelves that reached to the ceiling. The great man sat behind the desk; he'd been perusing some legal tome. Bee had spotted its wide empty spot in the bookshelves.

He halfway stood and offered a hand. "An MP's work never ends. Here I am on a Saturday figuring out if the law backs up a position I'll be expounding next week before my political enemies." They shook hands and he motioned towards two matching but smaller chairs in front of the massive desk. Taking his own seat again, he said, "And what can I do for you representatives of our fine constabulary today?"

"Satisfying our curiosity, to put it simply," Bee said. "I suppose you know about the protest that's still going on?"

"Democracy begins with the right of freedom of speech, officers. If the good people of our nation have that and behave themselves when expressing their opinions, we must let them protest."

"The organizers of that protest tend to sympathize with some extreme positions you've touted in Parliament. Far-right positions. So, I'm not surprised you'd say that."

He smiled but there was some menace visible in his eyes now. "Good for them, I dare say. They have legitimate grievances. I shan't deny them the right to express them, whether they agree with me or not. Enough voters in this district obviously do agree with me."

"How magnanimous of you, sir."

"You won't be participating in the protest?" Max said.

"Why, what would make you think that, young man? I'm an MP. My positions are better expressed in Parliament where they have a chance to make a difference for our citizens. That's where the power lies in the UK, as you both know very well. Our king is but a figurehead, a decoration to trot out when we need a bit of pomp and circumstance."

Max decided to be confrontational. "Indeed. So, the protesters will accomplish diddly-squat. Tell me, sir, do you have any idea why we'd find an advert for the protest with your name and number scrawled on the back?"

Mullens shrugged. "You're sure it's this number?" He pointed to the phone on the desk.

“No, I suppose we can’t be sure,” Bee said. “An important man like you must use several phones. Here, your parliamentary offices, your office at your electronics firm—who knows? Certainly at least one mobile. Or several, even pay-as-you-go, to keep your public life separate from your public. The pay-as-you-go phones perhaps for discreet social engagements?”

“Yes, I have a third phone, two landlines at the firm, and one at my office in Parliament, although the latter three can only be used to reach me via a switchboard run by receptionists.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a mobile. “And this is my only mobile.”

Bee decided pursuing what number of phones the MP had would be going down a rabbit hole and not lead to Wonderland but 1930s Nazi Germany. “We can check and find all of those numbers and many others, sir,” she said, winking at Max, “and compare them to the one we found. I’m more worried about why some neo-Nazi thugs would want to call you.”

“Inspector Berkeley, please use common sense. I’m a busy man who interests the media. Every media hound is baying at me to get an interview these days. Have you considered that one of them might want my opinion about the protest in the park? One you wanted too, I might add, and rightly so, because some of my positions, like you say, might be similar to those of the protesters.”

“Even though some of those protesters might be calling for the overthrow of the government?”

He laughed. “Says a policewoman who has a vested interest in continuing our police state and perhaps making it more oppressive. Unlike America, you’ve managed to take away everyone’s guns and posted cameras on nearly every public street corner. Conservatives are often called fascists; we’re not. We provide the logical counterbalance to irrational liberal positions.” He stopped to catch a breath and probably saw her sly wink at her sergeant. “Again, please use common sense, if you have any, madam. The British population has centuries of culture and tradition the Yanks don’t have or are capable of having. The British will never sink to the level of that mob that stormed the US capitol building. Angry words are common in a democracy, just part of civilized and political discourse. And some Yanks have said that mob was mostly composed of mad tourists who were upset about not being let in to tour the capitol. I’m inclined to believe that. In any case, all the political violence in the UK comes from the refugees and immigrants who used violent, terrorist methods back in their homelands and want to do the same here. They’re the ones who think violence is the answer. It never is in a civilized society like the UK.”

“Thanks for setting us straight on that with that little speech, sir,” Bee said, thinking of Carlos and other hard-working immigrants. “But let’s get down to more basic details: We’re looking for the assassin who murdered an innocent, old bloke. We suspect the attacker wanted that circular for some reason. The man who was murdered saved your life once, by the way. The only thing that distinguishes that advert for the protest from so many others that turned our streets into a tip is your name and a phone number on the back. Common sense tells me, sir, that man’s murder has something to do with you. And I promise you that the police will find out what it is. Good day, sir. Thank you for seeing us. Let’s go, Max.”

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Once in the car, Max smiled at Bee. “That was a fantastic little speech, boss, getting the last word in in response to his tirade. Put him in his place, you did.”

“He’s a preachy and arrogant old goat. And I meant what I said. I’m absolutely certain he’s involved in Sam’s murder in some way. But to find out how, we need to find Sam’s killer and grill him.”

“A solid hunch? Or a rabbit hole?”

“Often you can look a wanker in the eyes and know his words are shite. I also saw an evil man without much of a soul, if any. If memory serves, there was a US president who looked Putin in the eyes and saw that same lack. That president was correct. So am I about our representative in Parliament.”

“For the first, I knew some officers like that in the Royal Marines. Never any obvious evil. And I had the same feeling about Mullins, boss. That fascist is covering his privileged arse. And now he knows we have that circular. Maybe we shouldn’t have told him?”

“He’ll just try to cover his arse in some other way. We were at his residence because Roger found it, after all. Not Sam. Sometimes it’s just fate, Max. It works against the criminals and political thugs as much as it does against us.”

“I’d like to think we’re a lot smarter than either one. They take the easy way out: Instead of earning a living legally, they steal what hard-working, innocent people have earned. At the pinnacle of that immoral mountain of society’s wankers are the fascist politicians.”

“Your education in classics is on display again. Your portrait of the cancer every society struggles to control is quite eloquent, though. I’ll put it in simpler terms: The police must help innocents protect themselves from that immoral mountain of cruelty. That’s what drives me.”

“So, how do we find Sam’s killer?”

“By using the fact that neo-Nazis are involved. We should find anything we can about the organizers of the protest. They probably include the four at the pub and maybe MP Mullins as well.”

“And the killer? He didn’t match the description of any of those four. Or Mullins.”

“The killer might be just muscle.” She sighed. “At least we’ll be more focused now.”

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A DC working on traffic movements using the ANPR video records spotted the tall, thin man who could be the neo-Nazi from the pub leaving the park later in the day in an old Opel when the protest was winding down. The camera was at the corner of the park nearest to the main road and facing toward it, so the image wasn’t that clear and the DC wasn’t sure, but he showed it to Karen, who in turn brought it to Bee’s attention.

“Finally, a break! Yes, that could be one of them and easier to spot because of his height. The taxi is heading back along the main road into that old estate. Can you zoom in on the plate and then look for it on the motorway?”

The main highways had more cameras, justified by speed controls but often criticized as trampling on citizens’ rights, as Mullins had done. The first was correct, but the police could use them as low-quality tools against criminals as well. The hunt was now on for that taxi.

After an hour’s work, they found the old Opel but then lost it again. Karen had been checking the plate number, though, and had determined it was a cheap hire-car from an in-town agency not far from the nick, a taxi that was not a taxi.

“The agency won’t give up the lessee’s name without a warrant,” Karen told Bee.

“Give me the data. I’ll ask Gladys to get one. When it comes through, you and Max can go get the records and any security footage they might have from when the wanker leased the hire-car to do his rounds. I’ve already put out a BOLO for the Opel. We need a photo of the driver so Roger and Gary can confirm he was one of the four at *The Wild Stag*. I’m going out for a bite to eat. I’ll be back in an hour. You and Max should do the same. The DCs and PCs can carry on until we return to relieve them. Or they can stagger taking their dinner breaks. Sort all that.”

“You look tired, Bee.”

“Tired and frustrated, the latter more for the visit to that useless MP. But it’s been a long day. We all need a break. Has everyone left that park?”

“Our people, yes. There might be some hangers-on there who don’t get tired of all the ranting and raving.”

“Maybe all to the good. If they’re still indulging in that shite, they won’t be out and about creating violent mayhem.”

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After asking Gladys to do the favor of sorting the warrant—as a new DI in the area, she knew no police-friendly judges who would generate one quickly—she met Carlos at a curry house nearby. “Surprise! Surprise! I’ve got to work late. My day’s been hell. How’s yours been?”

“Busy with a lot of false alarms from our neighboring station.”

“Good. You weren’t at that protest in the park then. Those wankers don’t like immigrants. Even though you came here when you were three and you have no accent, they could attack you just for your skin color and slight accent. Fortunately, these neo-Nazis are in the minority. I met the honorable MP of our district today, by the way.” She summarized some of the day’s activities.

“The honorable Mr. Mullins. He could have been a speaker at that park. Is he on your list of suspects? That wouldn’t surprise me. His views are a throwback to the Nazis—even far to the right of most Tories.”

“Yes, we’ve got him in our sights, and, at least for now, he’s high on my list of suspects.”

“Do you mean that you think he ordered Sam’s killing?”

“No, but I think he wanted a circular that Roger had with his name and phone number on it. The scrote he sent to collect it probably just went too far because he was frustrated to report back that he hadn’t found it. I’m guessing, of course. After trashing Roger and Sam’s place, I’m also guessing he didn’t know the difference between those two old men. No one like Mullins would ever get his hands dirty.”

“Interesting. This Roger might be in danger.”

“My thoughts exactly. So, I arranged for him to not be alone in that big, rambling house.” She told Carlos how Gladys had come through by connecting Roger up with her sister Marjorie, and how she was now working on the warrant.

“I think Gladys has found a DI she can work with well.” He patted her hand. “But if you have to get back soon, we should order.”

“Eat and run. The story of my life, ever since I was a PC on patrol. Will you still love me if I sometimes neglect you?”

“I can be called out too. It’s part of our jobs.”

“Yes, but I have the awful feeling that what you do can be a lot more dangerous. As this case drags on, be careful. I don’t want you to be collateral damage.”

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Bee only finished half her curry, so she had the owner package up the remains so Carlos could take it home. As she drove back to the nick, she remembered her words to Carlos. He’d be worried about her too, so she’d have to follow her own advice and be careful.

Unfortunately, her words about him were prophetic. A little after ten, he called her. “I’m at the hospital. They bombed my flat, Bee! I bet they thought you were there!”

She knew who “they” referred to. “Are you okay?”

“They’re checking me over. A few burns. I was helping other people get out of the building because the bomb started a fire. It went off when I opened my front door. Sent me flying across the hall and knocked the wind out of me. Bomb squad, fire inspection team, and SOCOs have now commandeered my flat. I’ll be sleeping at the nick tonight.”

“I’ll try to give you some company if I can. Right now, I’ll be leaving to arrest a neo-Nazi who might be involved in Sam’s murder.”

“Be careful. My image of us holding hands as the walking wounded doesn’t sound all that romantic.”

She smiled at his grim humor. “I will be. And I’m taking Max.”

When they arrived at the run-down Council building and went to 11C, the address on the hire-car lease form, Bee knew something was wrong when an elderly woman responded to the doorbell ring. She showed the woman her warrant card. “We’re looking for Arthur Goode,” she said.

“Honey, no Arthur lives here, good or bad. There’s hardly room in this Council flat for little old me. Public housing isn’t posh, and this old bird was through with men decades ago.”

“Can we come in?”

“I could be a nasty old hag and say, ‘Where’s your warrant?’ but it’s nice to have some company even if you two are plods. Come on in. Want a mash? I can brew up three, and I just took some nice ginger snaps out of the oven. They’d get stale anyway by the time I got through the dozen, and this young and handsome fellow with you looks like he needs some nourishment.”

“No, thank you. We’ll just take a quick look to make sure no one is hiding here and keeping you captive. We’ll be quick, Mrs....”

“Miss. Miss June Dawson, and never a Mrs., thank God. Come right in. I’m a hospitable person. I worked as a dealer at a casino for many years, so I’ve seen all kinds, even plods. Some of you mean well, but our punters never liked you hanging around. I dare say, now I don’t much care.”

It didn’t take long for them to look through the bedsit, basically one room containing a galley kitchen and another that was a bathroom with a shower.

“I noted that there was an oxygen tank by your sofa bed, June,” Bee said as they were leaving. “Do you have a health worker who makes regular visits here to see you?”

“Thanks for your concern,” June said with a wry smile. “My health aide comes every Thursday afternoon and gives me a once-over. ‘Wellness check,’ she calls it. I’m okay except for my bit o’ COPD from all those years of secondhand smoke. She’s trying to get me to go someplace where I can be treated like an elderly invalid. I won’t do that, at least not yet. I value my independence, Inspector.”

“Okay. I’ll respect that decision.” Bee handed June a card. “Call me, her, or 999 if you ever need anything urgent. I’m sorry we bothered you.”

“No bother. Like I said, it’s nice to have some visitors, even if you are plods. Your fellow here is a welcome bit of handsome manhood too. You can visit me all you want if you bring him along. Take care, Inspector.” Bee and Max turned to head for the lift, but June stepped into the dim and dreary corridor and said, “Wait! I just remembered something. The bloke in 5C below me is an Arthur. Arthur Langley. Tall, thin fellow he is.”

“Then he used your address illegally and used a fake name to fool us.”

“Go get ‘im, tiger! He’s a shifty looking wanker, he is. All scars and strange tattoos. You’d think the Council would be more careful about who they let live here. I don’t like the looks of that Arthur. Not at all. A mean man who looks like he’d kill his mother for a few quid.”

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Bee and Max took the lift to the fifth level. Bee rang the doorbell to 5C. It didn’t work. She knocked loudly on the door. No response.

“Looks like we need to find the manager,” he said. “I wonder if there is one.”

“And another warrant,” she said with a sigh. “This is frustrating. I assumed that he’d be here after his day at the park. Let’s go and—”

At that moment, a tall, thin man exited the stairwell and entered the corridor. When he saw them, he reversed course and ran down the stairs again.

“Go after him, Max! I’ll take the lift.”

Arthur Langley was exiting the stairwell when Bee exited the lift. To get to the door to the street he would have to pass her.

“Halt! Police!” She showed her warrant card, knowing he’d probably ignore it.

He crossed the dingy lobby, tackled her, and began to strangle her. She tried to fight him off with fists and claws but weakened as the breath left her. But Max arrived and pulled the yob off her.

Still gasping for breath, she watched as her smaller sergeant and the tall scrote went at it. Just as she thought that Max was winning the row, the thug pulled out a knife and brandished it. Max didn’t back away, though; instead, he smiled and gestured to his opponent to come at him.

“Heil Hitler!” Arthur yelled, lunging at Max and thrusting the knife towards the policeman’s gut.

But Max’s midsection was no longer there, and he grabbed the yob’s outstretched arm, pulling it forward. Max gave his opponent a kick in the arse as he stumbled forward to fall on his face. Max then kicked the knife away and put the thug in a chokehold until he stopped moving.

“Is-is he dead?” Bee said. “You know that’s illegal!”

“I won’t say a thing if you don’t. And no boss, he’s just taking a little nap.” He put the handcuffs on his prisoner. “We’ll caution him when he comes out of it. Call for a zebra, please. We’ll need to put this wanker behind a security mesh to get him back to the station for questioning.”

As the patrol drove off with Arthur Langley, Bee noticed a small crowd of wrinklies like June had exited from the old Council tower. One started to applaud; the others joined in.

*Apparently, some residents have no use for Mr. Langley,* Bee thought.

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They interrogated Langley two hours later. Processing, putting him into prison garb, and letting him cool off a bit in his cell was responsible for some of the delay. The rest was on waiting for a doctor to examine the prisoner who claimed he had a concussion and debilitating wounds, and on the arrival of Langley’s solicitor. While Bee had bruises around her throat and Max had a few bruises as well, they’d declined any medical attention.

Gladys, Bee, and Karen watched the custody sergeant and PCs lead Langley into IR2. The PCs stayed, very much on guard, but the sergeant gave them a little wave as he left the room because he knew who was behind the one-way glass window. The smiling solicitor waited, looking like an old toff at a banquet in his three-piece suit and bow tie.

“That’s Dennis Courant,” Gladys said, her disapproval of the man on obvious display. “He’s made a fortune keeping gangsters out of jail. He thinks he’s the cat’s meow and irresistible to those of the opposite sex. He even tried to hit on me once.”

“How can a wanker like Langley afford an expensive lawyer like Courant?” Karen said.

“Because someone with a lot of money is paying for him,” Bee said.

“I was also thinking,” Gladys said, “that Mr. Langley has friends in high places. Be careful, ladies, but let’s see what we can find out. Take a conservative approach because Courant can wind us all up in so many trivial legalities in court that not even the CPS can predict what they might be. Remember that we already have Langley fitted for attacking two police officers.”

“No evidence, Gladys,” Bee said. “He could say we attacked him.”

Max, who’d entered the small room and was listening to their conversation, tapped his fancy watch. “We have some poor-quality video, but great audio. That knife thrust, though, will offer us a good image. Missed my gut, but almost hit my arm. By the way, that knife is like the one that killed Sam.”

“Probably every neo-Nazi at that park had a knife like that,” Bee said. “They might hand them out like that American president handed out those red hats. But the audio and video will back up our story, not his. I want more than that, though.”

There was next to no cooperation from Arthur or his solicitor. The former obviously didn’t need the latter very much; he was well-versed in the use of “no comment” and “prove it” responses, both making Courant smile thinly as he probably thought he was picking up a nice piece of change for doing very little actual work. Arthur only exhibited some tightening of his facial muscles and flickers in the eyes when they showed the video and listened to the audio.

“I still submit that’s only evidence of police brutality,” Courant said. “My client was only defending himself from a wild kung-fu maniac. I’m sure the police wanted to teach Mr. Langley a lesson after the park protest. Correct?”

Bee stared at the lawyer but controlled her temper as much as she could. “Beyond a lot of people spewing words of bigotry, hatred, and falsehoods about the Holocaust, Mr. Courant, the people you represent behaved themselves at that park. Whether you or your client believe it or not isn’t important to me, but the government does respect freedom of speech. Unlike you folks, we believe in democracy.”

Courant clapped a few times. “Nice speech, Inspector, but also empty words and lies. And those people at the park have legitimate grievances.”

“In their unstable minds.”

“And they were allowed to express those grievances,” Karen said. “I know. I was there. Were you, Mr. Courant?”

He smiled at her, but his eyes showed spite and hate. “My legal opinion is what matters here. And that is that you have no proof to pursue a case against my client other than a poor audio and video recording depicting police brutality. Just to be nice, I won’t sue the constabulary for your actions.”

“Counselor, I thank you for your attendance here to represent your client,” Bee said. “I’m relatively new here, so it’s nice to know firsthand who the real enemies of law and order are. Your client will be remanded to his cell. End of session.” She shut off the recorder, and she and Karen left Courant and Langley with the PCs.

Talking after Arthur was taken to the basement and his solicitor had smugly taken his leave, the three women and Max mused over the results of the interrogation.

“Langley’s a hardened criminal,” Gladys said, “but I believe someone else killed Sam. By the way, Bee, while I agree with the sentiments you expressed, your next-to-last comment to Courant wasn’t appropriate.”

Bee ignored Gladys’s chastisement. “We knew that Langley couldn’t have killed Sam, but did he order the search at Roger’s house and the later attack on Sam? Even if the intention of the attack on Sam wasn’t premeditated murder, it’s aiding and abetting, and we can add manslaughter and home invasion charges. That sleazy lawyer might get him free on time served if we only pursue charging him with attacking two police officers, using what’s on Max’s audio and video record as evidence.”

“Calm down, Bee. All I’m saying is that we need more evidence. I don’t want to limit ourselves in the CPC. You know as well as I do that Langley is a middleman. Someone’s pulling that puppet’s strings.”

“And I bet it’s the honorable Mr. Mullins,” Max said.

“And that will need rock-solid evidence,” Gladys said. “Go get it, you three. Somewhere below Langley in the pecking order is Sam’s killer; somewhere above him is a person I want too.”

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“I guess our DCI is right,” Karen said after Bee and her sergeants had retreated to the DI’s office.

“Unfortunately,” Max said. “And I’m at a loss about how to proceed.”

Bee smiled. “Perhaps the solicitor will lead to the puppet master. We can get phone records without a warrant if we don’t ask for content. We can even ask for the latter with a warrant. There must have been a flurry of calls between Courant and the person paying his bills to protect anyone arrested at the protest.”

“If that’s the MP, it might be one of those pay-as-you-go phones he didn’t admit to having.”

“But we can get those numbers and see who he’s been talking to and then correlate them with both Courant and Langley’s calls. In particular, I think Langley called Courant, which is allowed, and then Courant got the okay from higher-up, maybe the MP, to save Langley’s arse. So, we even know the period of time to focus on. While we’re at it, we might as well see who Langley called from the pub. I’ll bet it was some skinhead who was supposed to get the circular from Roger, mistook Sam for Roger, and then lost it when Sam didn’t have it. We’ll follow Gladys’s advice: Go up the ladder as well as down.”

Karen and two DCs became telephone-detectives. Max, two more DCs, and a half-dozen PCs tried to trace every movement of Mullins and Langley during the four days bracketing the park protest. All other efforts were put on hold. Bee tried to keep it all sorted and, at the same time, keep up on the investigation of the fire at Carlos’s flat that the fire investigators had said was arson. She didn’t know if he had told anyone she was there a lot recently, but, if he had, it wouldn’t take a genius to think she might be the target even more than Carlos. But that wouldn’t matter in the search for the arsonist.

Beyond possibly giving orders over their phones, Mullins and Langley had solid alibis for the house’s ransacking and Sam’s murder: The MP was in London that night Sam was killed, either in Parliament in a late session or his office there; Langley was at the pub with the three others the police hadn’t yet identified. At other times in that four-day period, the police were slowly determining the whereabouts of the two: Mullins was either in London or at his local

residence; Langley was either meeting with the protest organizers, in a jail cell, or at his bedsit in the Council tower.

The phone records were also disappointing: They soon knew what phones were registered to Mullins and Langley from the phone companies and what calls were made from those phones, but they knew nothing about any possible pay-as-you-go phones that anyone could buy from a store rack. Among the list of calls, though, was a call received by Langley from one of the MP's phones, suspicious in itself, and a call made by Langley to a pay-as-you-go phone, both calls occurring just before Sam was murdered at the park. Backtracking in time, that led Karen and her team to see that just before that a call from that cheap phone occurred to Langley and then a call from Langley to Mullins. If those two had pay-as-you-go phones, they'd been arrogant enough not to use them, maybe thinking equipping the lower echelons with cheap phones was expense enough.

Bee smiled at that thought. *Arrogance is a trait that can lead to stupid actions!*

"I have a theory," Bee said to Karen. "Sam's killer called Langley from the house to say they hadn't found the advert for the protest, Langley called Mullins for instructions, the MP thinks about it and calls back to say that one of the skinheads in the house should go after Roger, who must have the circular with him. That man confronts Sam, thinking he's Roger, and loses the rag when he doesn't find the advert."

"That fits the facts," Karen said, "but it would hardly convince the CPS. It's more or less what we've been thinking all along, the calls stitching everything together if we add the calls involving the unknown person. How do we prove that theory, though, with hard evidence?"

"All those phones, pay-as-you-go or otherwise, must have had sim cards of some kind. Unless all the callers had the presence of mind to turn the geolocation off, something that's always the default, we should try to locate them all during that time."

"We need a tech to get at those locations."

"Find one, and finish what you can do with the calls that were made. Then help Max and the others. We're making a progress. Let's keep making that happen."

Karen hesitated. "Max said there was a crowd of elderly people at that Council building who seemed to be happy to see you two arrest Langley. Have they been interviewed about Langley's comings and goings?"

"There hasn't been time, but thanks for reminding me. Langley's in the middle of this, Mullins maybe on top, and someone else lower down. We've got video from the pub now. Try to get something from the tenants and correlate Langley's movements with the phone-call times. Maybe we can get a handle on that unknown caller or on the other three at the pub, and someone will grass on Langley or even Mullins. We have—"

Bee's mobile rang at that moment. Her side of the conversation didn't give Karen a clue who was talking at the other end except that it was a man's voice. When she disconnected, she smiled at Karen. "We might have a break." She told her sergeant about the fire at Carlos's flat. "Molotov cocktails were tossed onto the balcony to start the fire and aid the inside explosion. One bottle's fuse didn't work and the SOCOs found it under a planter. The bottle had Langley's prints on it. We've got the bastard, and I'm going to make him grass on his mates by adding yet another charge. This one will be attempted murder."

"Why would he want to kill Carlos? He didn't even know him."

"He didn't want to kill Carlos. He wanted to kill the SIO for the case. I'm not going to pussy-foot around this time. AROs will bring in Langley, without Carlos, of course, to keep the CPS happy. Excuse me now. I need to talk to our DCI."

“Shall Max and I proceed with your plan?”

“Yes. The more evidence we have, the better off we’ll be.”

As Karen walked out to find Max, she couldn’t help wondering, *Why would Bee be with Carlos?* She then stopped in midstride and smiled. *Of course!*

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Bringing in Langley had presented no problem for the AROs. He hadn’t done a runner. His arrogance had led him to return to his bedsit, believing he was out of the woods, but several tenants informed the armed police officers that he was in his flat. They didn’t fool around. They had a warrant for his arrest and a battering ram. He had acquired another knife and threatened the lead ARO, but, faced with guns, he dropped his weapon and held out his hands to receive the cuffs. Once at the station, he made his one call to Courant—not on his mobile, but on a police landline, because techs had disappeared with the mobile.

Bee and Max had just settled down with Courant and his client when Karen entered and whispered in Bee’s ear as she handed her a paper. She smiled and nodded. She started the video recording as Karen left the interrogation room.

After cautioning Langley once again, she said, “Counselor, I’m now handing you the charge sheets we have against your client. I’ll give you a few moments to examine them. There’s only one new charge.”

Courant read them all and frowned. “I need some time with my client, please.”

“Agreed. Interrogation postponed for counselor and suspect to confer.” She pushed the pause button on the recorder. Once outside Karen was waiting for Bee and Max to join her, anticipating Courant’s delay tactics. “If Langley’s in a grassing mood against his mates with this new charge, I want to pressure him to grass on Mullins as well.”

“Or on whoever ordered the hits, Sam’s and Carlos’s.” Karen said.

“Sam’s might be only manslaughter for Langley, but Carlos’s was attempted murder. But you’re right: Langley didn’t order either one. I want to nick who did, and I think it’s Mr. Mullins.”

Max was reading the originals of the charge sheets. “Both Langley and his unknown accomplice will want to lighten their life sentences to life with a chance of parole.”

The duty sergeant now surprised them, running up the stairs and out of breath. “Tech says that there’s a call going out from IR1, Inspector!”

“Either Courant or Langley still has a phone!” She ran to the door to the room and flung it open, catching Courant in the act. “Give me that phone! Now!”

He smiled and rung off. “Sorry. I forgot my spare. I was just ordering some pizza.”

Bee clicked through to the last number called and showed it to Karen and Max.

“Recognize that number?”

“It’s Mullins’s number!” both sergeants said in unison.

“Thank you, Mr. Courant, for telling us who hired you, not that it’s much of a surprise.” To her sergeants, Bee said, “Watch these two, especially the lawyer, whom I want to put in jail as well. In fact, take them all to cells and give them their prison uniforms. They’re flight risks, and we will charge them all. I’m sending an ARU to Mullins’s mansion.”

“You’re making a big mistake!” yelled Courant. “If the MP doesn’t sue your arse, I will!”

“Shut your yap, Courant! Your charge sheet will be delivered to you in your cell. Like I said, I’m going to charge all three of you! And our district’s MP as well!”

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*Two weeks later...*

Bee took a biscuit to accompany her tea and smiled at Gladys. "A good mash, I dare say. A clever barrister might get Mullins and Courant off, but I wager Mr. Mullins will lose his next election with all the media scandal exposing his life as a neo-Nazi. In the meantime, he won't be causing any trouble in Parliament after being censored there. I hope Courant at least loses his license to practice, of course. The four at the pub, Langley included, will get long sentences, Langley's not as long as I'd like because he grassed on Sam's killer. When we find that wanker, he'll get life, no parole chances. Perhaps we should be drinking champagne."

"I'd much rather have an Irish whiskey, to be honest. Your energy is enviable, Bee. Congrats."

"You helped immensely, backing up the team when needed. Yes, soon we must all celebrate properly."

"Not until you and your team finish preparing all the cases for the Crown Prosecution Service."

"That's nearly done. We actually don't have all that much hard evidence, but with all the rats falling over themselves to grass on each other, I believe we have solid cases against them all."

Gladys sighed. "It's always a crap shoot with the CPS. We do our jobs the best we can, but sometimes they fail to do theirs. Can't be helped. How's Carlos?"

"Oh, it cheered him up to no end when Mullins was arrested. He knows that the MP and the arse who torched his place are going to jail eventually. He's looking for new lodging. As for his injuries, he's recovering nicely. He's a real asset you'll want to keep around, Gladys."

"Not my call, but no one is doubting that, I assure you." She raised her cup and eyed Bee over its brim; a large smile and wink soon followed. "And somehow I knew you'd say that."

## Note from Steve

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And please check out the longer mystery, thriller, and sci-fi novels from my Irish colleague A. B. Carolan and me (for descriptions and review excerpts, see the website indicated above):

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Gaia and the Goliaths  
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Son of Thunder  
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The Last Humans  
A New Dawn: The Last Humans: Book Two  
Menace from Moscow: The Last Humans, Book Three

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Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By  
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**Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas!**

## 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.