



THIS BEE CAN REALLY STING!

Volume Two: Murder Upriver

Steven M. Moore



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

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Volume Two: Murder Upriver
Two DI Bee Berkeley Stories...or Three?

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SAMPLE

Preface

As many of my readers know, I've experimented a lot with writing British-style mysteries and 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 these experiments, and the published collection, *Sleuthing, British-Style*, is available as an inexpensive ebook, as are its sequels that are also free PDF downloads.)

Here in these pages, I present a few more cases involving Bee Berkeley, a British Detective Inspector who decided to continue her career 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 very British Esther Brookstone and Steve Morgan, she has some unique qualities. I hope her further adventures contained herein continue to 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 file 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 personal advertising!

For now, just enjoy these stories, however you count them...and see why I continue to 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

Big Smoke—London, England

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

panda—squad car

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 much

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 Siochana (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.

Main Characters

DI Belinda “Bee” Berkeley
Rodney Berkeley, barrister (deceased)
DS Max Bloomfield
Tod Bridges, NCA Agent III
Greg Elston, owner of *The Eagle’s Nest*
Rick “Rocky” Giordano, *The Eagle’s Nest*’s bouncer
Arthur Goode, third victim
Sheila Hanlon, Oxford researcher
DCI Gladys Harkness
Dr. Gwendolyn (Gwen) Harris, pathologist
Thomas Hart, Oxford tutor
DS Carlos Lobo-Guerrero, ARU leader
Phil Martin, lead SOCO
Denise McBride, second victim
Martin McBride, Bridgeton town treasurer
Patty Robertson, first victim and member of the “Ugly Ducklings”
Claus Samson, a handyman
DS Karen Strong
DCI Roy Westwood, temporary replacement for Gladys Harkness
Harry Wilson, “The Ugly Ducklings” leader
DC Oscar Williams
Dan Wright aka Dan Caswell, POI in two murders

Part One Rock Star

Chapter One

Thursday: Tensions among the Troops

Bee and Max let Carlos and his AROs lead the way down the dim, cluttered, and sloping concrete ramp into the warehouse's dank basement. Its dampness was more obvious than most, perhaps because of its proximity to the river or because the warehouse was often bathed in the Thames's fog so prevalent a large part of the year.

Bee tried to ignore the cobwebs and insects' dead bodies they might hold, victims of the spidery engineers of the webs. The sound of scurrying rats, also found near river sites, especially those inhabited by humans, was more obvious to her senses. At times she could see their warm bodies and eyes like little headlights fleeing their human parade even in the green gloom of the night-vision goggles. *Or especially in that green gloom?* The ARU's borrowed equipment chaffed the skin around her eyes. *Why did I insist on accompanying these blokes? I'm not an ex-Royal Marine like Carlos and Max!*

"On three, goggles off. One, two, three!" Carlos echoed as if they were in a cave.

The ARU's torches now flooded the basement with light, partially blinding the three men who'd been waiting below ready to confront the approaching police. They were dressed in combat gear. Carlos and the other AROs were dressed in the same manner, and even Bee and Max had on protective vests.

Facing a fully armed ARU, all three criminals put down their very illegal military-style automatic rifles. Two held up their hands in defeat.

"Smart move, chappies," Carlos said. No ARO yet lowered his weapon, though. "Let's see your handguns now, fellows."

Two took them from out of their back waistbands and tossed them onto the floor, raising their hands, but the third wanker aimed his gun at Carlos. A hail of bullets ended that prat's life.

Carlos approached the remaining duo and kicked all the rifles and handguns aside. "Hands behind the backs, chappies."

Bee and Max rose from the dirty basement's floor where by reflex they'd dove for safety when the plonker had pointed his handgun towards Carlos. Max cautioned the duo after they were handcuffed, and then the ARU led them out of the basement to the vans waiting outside. They'd return later for the dead body. No ARO was particularly worried about what the rats might do to him in the meantime.

"Three more right-wing terrorists out of commission, Bee," Max said to her as they followed the entourage.

"One permanently. I'm not shedding any tears."

"No one will," Carlos said, looking back at them over his shoulder.

"And now we need to interrogate the two smarter ones," Bee said. "Any bets that one of them will grass on the rest of the gang?"

"I'm betting they won't," Carlos said. "They've trained overseas to resist a worst interrogation than what you'll be allowed to give them."

"I'm afraid you're right," Bee said with a sigh. "But we have to try, don't we?"

"Not just for us," Max said. "I suspect MI5 will now get involved."

Bee groaned and made a sour face. She'd had some bad experiences with those UK-wide coppers during her time at the Met and even in her new posting in Bridgeton, upriver but still within the London conurbation, but she then considered the brighter side: "They're welcome to pursue them nationwide. We did our job here and captured the schoolteacher's killers."

That was always what motivated Detective Inspector Bee Berkeley. They weren't often proactive enough—local police had neither the personnel nor the funding to proactively pursue a nationwide gang of criminals, especially at her new police substation where she was the only DI—but they could give relatives and friends some closure by nicking the bad blokes who preyed on innocent victims.

Those thoughts sharpened in clarity as she drove towards the teacher's parents' home after the interrogation that had produced only a lot of statements like "no comment" and "I refuse to answer," the first preferred more than the second by the duo's brief. The Muslim pair's daughter had been violently raped and murdered by the three men from the basement and the two survivors would now be in gaol for the remainder of their lives. That wouldn't bring back the couple's daughter, but it was something. They'd at least know, along with the police, that her murderers would never kill again.

"We need to talk, Belinda," Carlos said as Bee hung her raincoat on their coat rack that Thursday evening. "You and Max shouldn't have been in that basement."

Bee never used her given name Belinda; and Carlos only used it to chastise her, although it almost sounded like something from his native language. *Perhaps Carlos is underestimating Max?* An impartial observer might have wondered how a five-foot-eight detective sergeant could go after scrotes who obviously had bulked up with steroids and often got their courage from other drugs. 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 those men, would certainly add to that wonder. Carlos shouldn't be at all surprised, though.

She ignored his objection. "Max and I were there to identify those three yobs, Carlos. And FYI: Gladys already gave us flak."

"Did you tell her to stuff it too?"

She smiled. "Sorry about that, big man. Tense moments. But we had our vests on."

He got up, went to her, and poked a finger at her forehead. "Bam! You're dead! No bullet-proof vest there, Bee. That's why AROs wear combat helmets."

She moved his hand aside and kissed him. "I didn't have time to debate the issue. Your team only had the facial sketch of the leader our artist made from my description, but I personally saw the bloke you killed and something of the other two. I could ID the leader if necessary."

He hugged her close. "I can't overrule you because you outrank me, but you know I'm right."

"As it turned out, does it matter now?" Looking at the set table, she decided to change the subject. "Did you get takeaway?"

"It'll be coming as a delivery. You probably have time for a shower, *mujercita*. You need one after kissing that basement floor with its scattered rat droppings."

"Ew! Don't remind me. And were you thinking of that now?"

"No. I knew your sweet breath would sterilize any buggers you might have. But the rest of you is questionable, I dare say."

She laughed. “I’m in for a shampoo as well to get the cobwebs out of my hair. That place was a complete tip.”

In contrast to Carlos’s little house that they managed to keep neat even though there were two occupying it now. The man wasn’t anal about order, but on her first visit she’d noticed two things: It had everything a couple of busy working people could want to get away from the daily grind and relax, and it wasn’t a sterile environment because it seemed to embrace the people living there. Carlos had been the first to admit that she’d added something that was missing, though.

Later she ate with one towel wrapped around her hair and another around her waist. After a few bites of naan and forkfuls of tikka masala and basmati rice, she had enough energy to face Carlos’s worried expression again.

“Okay. I’ll admit in hindsight that Max and I took a chance. Satisfied?”

“You did.” He finger-combed his shock of brown hair sprinkled now with gray here and there, hair she loved to tussle when he was inside her, top or bottom, and sighed. “Any one of those wankers could probably have taken your head off even from a hundred yards. That’s another thing they’ve trained for.” He motioned to include both of them. “We’ve found each other, Bee. That’s a good thing, right?”

“Yes, of course. More than found, big man. But I was just so set on seeing them nicked. Max was too.”

“Very immature, to say the least, more his style, considering his age, and quite irresponsible in your case, considering yours.”

She took a sip of wine to give herself some time to think of a rebuttal. “I’m not ready for the nursing home, *hombron*.” His frown widened. “Okay, I get it. In fact, I once told Max not to be so rash after he took down a jewelry thief who wanted to take his head off with a cricket bat. I warned him at the time that there are blokes besides him who know martial arts. I believe I specifically mentioned right-wing domestic terrorists who were also ex-military like you two are as examples. A case of my not practicing what I preach in your mind’s eye, I suppose? Will you forgive me? I’m not quite used to being so close to someone just yet, but I agree that we need to keep each other safe.”

“I’m someone who loves you,” Carlos said in a soft voice.

“Same here.”

The next morning, Carlos was called out early for a mission involving a case involving the police substation next door, so Bee sent him off with a full English and then took her time picking at hers and getting ready for work. She figured she deserved another leisurely shower after that breakfast. The make-up sex had been splendid, so she needed the shower anyway.

Months earlier, Bee had pushed for a parallel transfer from the misogynistic Met in London after her husband Rodney of many years had passed on. He’d been a barrister, lover, and confidant, and they’d each tolerated the other’s long hours, his as a barrister—he’d believed that every UK citizen deserved competent legal representation when needed—and hers as a detective inspector—she believed a copper’s duty was to bring criminals to justice who’d preyed on innocents. They’d often worked at cross-purposes but laughed about it.

At her new nick, upriver in the Thames Valley in an area filled with ex-Londoners who’d escaped from the Big Smoke to form part of the greater London conurbation and commuters still traveling to work there, her dreams of relaxing into a peaceful retirement had been dashed. The criminals had changed for the most part, but the crimes, while a bit fewer in number, were just as

bad if not more complex. She'd been compensated by fate, though, when she'd met the big ARO, Carlos Lobo-Guerrero, a gentle and loving man who differed from Rodney Berkeley but filled an empty space in her heart that had needed to be filled. She felt lucky to have found him and was sure that Rodney and Carlos would have got along well.

Most problems with Carlos arose because their work was more closely related than Rodney and hers had been. She'd met Carlos at a time when she needed some protection, but now he often seemed over-protective. She'd admitted to her DCI, her DS, and Carlos himself that her reasoning about how to approach the encounter in that warehouse's basement had been a bit flawed. It was yet another lesson learned, and she felt her age didn't mean she couldn't still learn them. Max had blown it off—he was young and often took risks he shouldn't—but both Gladys and Carlos had chastised her.

Was I so terribly wrong and still thinking that her new position wasn't all that dangerous compared to my previous one with the Met? Her expectations perhaps had been unrealistic after that parallel transfer. For one thing, London's criminals didn't seem as sophisticated as the ones in the burbs. For another, policing in the burbs wasn't as compartmentalized as it was in the Met. Her new nick only had the usual PCs and PSs in uniform plus her Criminal Investigative Department (CID) without other divisions concentrating on drugs interdiction, fraud, and vice, for example. The SOCOs were mostly private contractors, and the ARUs were shared among several local police stations. That meant, though, that her CID, in other words, her team, covered everything from breaking and entering to violent murder and rape. While Gladys their DCI sometimes helped when they were stretched too thin, she helped much more by herding the media's hacks and interfacing with police and municipal VIPs. Bee worked well with Gladys, and that had been a welcome change from the Met as well.

Bee mulled over all that during the short drive to the station and walk into her office after a wave at Eddie, their duty sergeant, who responded with a bright "Good morning, Inspector Berkeley." She even got along with him and the custody sergeants, something Max had to continue to work at.

Chapter Two

Friday: A New Case for the Team

Bee had been staring at and sorting the mountains of notes and papers associated with the case of the far-right domestic terrorists all day, mostly wasting a lot of time wondering where and how to begin prep for both the Crown Prosecution Service' presentation and a report for MI5. A call from PC Franklin thankfully ended that internal debate.

After a quick phone conversation, Bee headed for the open-plan area just beyond the DCI's office where most CID personnel sat. Max wasn't in yet; but her other sergeant Karen was there, ever the diligent officer and often the first in each morning except weekends.

DS Karen Strong had always seemed to be a level-headed member of Bee's team exhibiting a maturity that Max Bloomfield sometimes lacked. Karen was a steady rock; Max could be impulsive. Those qualities mirrored characteristics of Bee's own personality, so the two sergeants complemented each other and Bee as well.

Karen didn't have Max's martial arts skills, though. She wore her brown hair with red highlights trimmed short and, although attractive enough, she had a physique that suggested toughness. She'd learned to use her mental acuity to compensate for strength and physical prowess. That often made her a better person to bounce ideas off than Max, who could have used some of Carlos's mental sharpness at times.

You work with the team you're given, Bee thought. And only a fool wouldn't know their strengths and weaknesses.

"Good morning, Karen. Grab a pool car and meet me out front," Bee told her. "I'll leave a note for Max to sort the team. We most likely have another murder case."

DS Karen Strong was better than Max Bloomfield at organizing an investigation the way Bee liked it to be organized, but she was just as good at being Bee's bagman in the field if one ignored Max's skills at martial arts. Of course, with any possibility of gunplay, an ARU might be more welcome to the foray than experts in martial arts, so either Carlos's or another group shared among the stations in the area would be called to the crime scene if necessary.

"Traffic's hell," Bee said as they rode along in the little EV from the pool. Bee and Karen preferred their own cars, but the new EVs offered many advantages—economy, maneuverability in tight spaces, and an appearance like the preferred vehicles of rich, commuting London workers, unless they had been painted black and white, which earned them the nickname pandas or zebras and were used by uniformed PCs and PSs.

"Three p.m. on a Friday. The migration from the Big Smoke to here is at its peak. The city's even worse. But you already know that."

"Just hit the blues and twos so some of these plonkers move aside for us. I'll glare at them if they don't."

When they arrived at the crime scene, they saw that the SOCOs and pathologist's vans were already there. Bee gave a wave to Phil Martin, the lead SOCO, and then went on to the pathologist's tent. PC Melody Franklin was there to meet them; she handed out gloves, booties, and hazard suits.

"Knock, knock," Bee said at the tent's entrance after donning the required garb.

Dr. Gwendolyn Harris, the county's head pathologist, looked up. "'Tis a messy one, Bee. Multiple stab wounds. Much more than needed to kill her."

Bee and Karen stepped farther inside. "Explain. Are we talking about uncontrolled rage?"

“Could be. Or a desire to practice for future work? I’m not a psychiatrist. You just never know how a psychopath thinks. I see that no jewelry, shoes, or clothes got in the way either.”

Bee glanced at the bare feet, which were about size nine and flat, reminding her of a Hobbit’s; the toes were painted carefully with a silvery pink nail polish possibly indicating a preference for sandals. “Any signs of sexual intercourse?” That could imply either consensual or forced sex, but the lack might mean other things, including the possibility that the killer was a woman.

Gwen rose from her crouch. “She wasn’t a virgin, but there’s nothing to indicate recent intercourse. I’ll know more when I’ve got her on my exam table.”

Both Karen and Bee now crouched and moved around the body.

“I’ll need a clear picture of that tattoo,” Bee said, pointing to the beginning of artwork that started on the hip and disappeared around the buttocks. Gwen nodded.

“Early twenties, I’m guessing,” Karen said. “Could be from Oxford heading into the city to have a fun weekend.”

Bee nodded. “Or just a young local lady out to do the same here in our own area. Or maybe she’d already started and that got her into trouble. Considering this area is near some pubs and nightclubs, she might have hooked up with some young bloke whose idea of fun was murder.”

“Or she was just surprised by a complete stranger,” Dr. Harris said. “A lot of people cut through here from the high street to the towers. But answers to those questions are all your problems, detectives, not mine.” Gwen winked at Karen.

“Any guesses at TOD and COD?” Bee said, now standing with her head touching the tent top. Karen had to stoop even more; her reddish curls would be flattened when she removed the suit.

Gwen pointed to some faint blotches on the neck. “I believe she was strangled first. I’ll know better when I thoroughly examine her. TOD is probably sometime during the last three hours, maybe more towards dusk, which would match some of Karen’s guesses. I’m going by the rigor and the weather not being neither warm nor cold.”

“Where are her clothes?” Karen said.

“Good question,” said the doctor. “Maybe the SOCOs will find them?”

“Or maybe she wasn’t killed here,” Bee said.

“That’s possible. She could have been murdered elsewhere and dumped here.”

“I doubt she has any form, so we’ll have a tough time even for an ID,” Bee said with a frown. “Hopefully we don’t have to wait ‘til Monday for someone to come forward and file a mispers. Let’s see if Phil or his crew have found anything. Catch you later, Gwen. Let us know when you’ll do the PM.”

Bee knew Karen and Phil got along well, both somewhat introverted, shy, and smart individuals who made their workdays easier by joking around about most anything that wasn’t related to their jobs. They represented the new diversity the old police often had a problem with—maybe less with Karen, who was an athletic redhead who loved to watch football; and more with Phil, an athletic and wiry black man who loved to play it in his free time. She left them to their quips and teasing taunts and began to walk around the area of the crime scene, avoiding the SOCOs for the most part so they could work in peace.

The residence towers were so near to the crime scene that she could hear young children who lived there or were visiting, lots of laughing and probably playing she couldn’t see—one

would have to climb that steep bank to watch them in their imaginary worlds. The slope down to the roadway to where their pool car was parked was much gentler. The victim's body had been found among the bushes and tall grass halfway down, probably not an easy climb for even a strong man carrying a body. *And wouldn't he have been seen by vehicles passing by?*

She concluded that the victim had most likely been tossed from the top of the bank. *Is there a road up there?* Being new to the area, she didn't know. She asked that question of the nearest SOCO.

"Yes, ma'am, the approach road that goes from the carriageway to those new residential towers. It winds around a bit after the turnoff. It might just be as busy as the one down there below, if not more so, until late evening when everyone's tucked in."

"Could someone check up there, along the side of that road just above where the body is especially? The victim could have been tossed down from there."

The SOCO looked upwards. "We'll take a look, ma'am."

The report wasn't long in coming.

"How did you know?" Karen said to Bee as they got into the pool car to return to their station.

"One person, not even a strong one, would have an easy time carrying up a body to where it was found. Pushing it over the bank could be easily done, even by another woman."

"Do you think she was killed by someone living in one of those towers' flats?"

"A question we must now consider, Karen. That's where we'll first focus the house-to-house inquiries. There aren't very many residences below. On another note, we'll also have to check dental records and DNA to get the victim's ID, I suspect. Work for the SOCOs and Doc Gwen. Back at the station, we can also begin trawling databases for mispers—HOLMES, Europol and Interpol's, some of the European countries'."

"Yes, we need a name for the victim. But if she's local, someone around here must know her."

"If all else fails, I'll tell Gladys to arrange for a media appeal to the public-at-large." Bee eyed her sergeant. "Do you know a good place for pub grub on the way back? I had a very light lunch."

Bee didn't say that lunch had only been a bag of crisps and a soda. She also didn't say that she'd gone overboard on the tikka masala and naan the night before and didn't eat most of her full English, which she should have done to get through the day. It would be quicker to sate her hunger with some quality food and a nice ale on the way back to the station. *Will Carlos still love me if I put on some pounds?*

"I know just the place," Karen said. "Good ale and quick service for the food, which is quite good."

"I guess we can't use the blues and twos, can we?"

Karen laughed. "Probably not advisable, Guv."

Chapter Three

Saturday: The Investigation Begins

Bee and Max left the post-mortem session hosted by Doc Gwen without knowing much more about the case or the victim. The PM did confirm via grass, weeds, and burrs on the victim's body, mostly in her hair, that the body had rolled down the bank from above. Dental records would have to wait until Monday, but they might not be available; and DNA comparisons would only add information if for some reason the young woman had either been arrested previously or had been in the military, the second a lot more unlikely than the first.

"Let's not wait 'til next week to check for mispers reports," Bee said to Max. "She might have become missing just a few hours earlier and was held somewhere against her will. Max, have some DCs and PCs chase down mispers reports already existing. Karen and I will see how the house-to-house is going at those residential towers. Being the weekend, more people might be at home than on Friday. There's also an ANPR cam just before the turnoff to the approach road to the residences, so we can assume motorists slowing down there yesterday are doing so to turn off. We might spot some suspicious cars. PCs can help us there too, bless their souls."

Besides some general questions and showing a picture of the victim's cleaned-up face, Bee had her crew doing the house-to-house ask those interviewed if they'd seen a vehicle stop and park above the crime scene. Most of Saturday went by without results from any of the team's efforts, but their luck changed by that evening. An older couple who lived in one of the high-rise flats provided some important information.

PS Franklin and PC Douglas had been invited inside the modest but comfortable flat. After sharing in a late tea where Ken Douglas munched contentedly on Linda Neeson's homemade biscuits, Ralph Neeson told his story. The wrinklie did a lot of handwaving and nervously smoothed his shock of white hair, but Linda Neeson was calm about the visit and amused by Ken's appetite. From the pictures on the mantle, Melody figured a young man in one was their son, so maybe Ken reminded them of their own lad.

"Towards sunset, we were watching birds from our balcony with my binoculars," Ralph said. "Even seabirds fly this far up the Thames at times, so there's always a diverse bunch of our fine feathered friends coming out at dusk, especially those that feast on the insects." Linda showed the two officers the binoculars.

Without the binoculars, Melody might have questioned what the old couple had seen, but those powerful lenses could capture details naked eyes couldn't discern as the sun sank towards the horizon and the fog from the Thames started to roll in. The uniformed sergeant couldn't imagine anything more boring than watching fog thicken, so she could understand the improved distraction offered by the birds. Perhaps the couple extended their hobby to nature trails as well?

Even better, the old fellow had seen a man unloading an old carpet from an unmarked van and rolling something that had been in it over the road's edge. "I said to the missus, there's another pillock illegally tossing his garbage down our bank. We can see the whole bank from up here. And that's not a rare occurrence, officers. You police should put a stop to it."

"Ralph did say that. I've seen 'em too, officers. Scurrilous tramps, they are. What's this world coming to?"

Later, a few PCs who'd patrolled the area on occasion mentioned to Melody and Ken that there had been calls before about illegal dumping down that bank. Tower residents had mostly given up trying to get the police to do something. Illegal dumping and littering were crimes that

weren't prioritized by the police, mostly for lack of personnel even among the uniformed officers.

Matching the partial plate number of that van with the ANPR records led the team to a hire-car agency and the lessee of the van, a Mr. Jack Smith, a name that sounded fake. Everyone was knackered, though, so Bee thought that following up on that clue could wait. The agency was open on Sundays.

"Let's pursue that tomorrow," Bee said to the team.

Bee walked out of the station with Karen and spotted Carlos's car. "How nice. My ride's here."

Karen smiled. "I'm glad you and Carlos are together."

"Seems to be working so far," Bee said. "I think old Mrs. Murphy at the boarding house was glad to get rid of me—she's like the Mum I never knew, a bit wary of Carlos, but she probably didn't like my unusual working hours."

Karen now laughed. "I'm sure it's more like her celebrating your and Carlos's hooking up. Around here, she's everyone's friend and confidant and probably could be elected Lord Mayor if she ever ran for the post."

"Um, I might encourage her to do that. Our present one seems like a pompous prat at times, although I haven't lived here long enough to accumulate serious evidence to back up that opinion. Tomorrow midmorning, okay? That's what I told Max. We all need some time for our families and friends."

"Okay by me."

Karen waved Bee and Carlos off and then got into her own car. She liked Bee but had to wonder if she'd have the DI's support if she passed her exams. She'd probably have to make a transfer upriver. *Maybe Oxford? Now that would make Max envious!* Bee's other sergeant was an Oxford graduate. He generally didn't advertise that to avoid teasing. Her coworker, also a good companion and an important member of Bee's team, often said things that led some uniformed officers to call him "the gay professor." Knowing about his martial arts skills, though, Karen thought only a complete prat would dare say that to Max as a jest or taunt.

Karen wasn't as educated as either Bee or Max, but she thought she was a good, solid copper. *But am I ready to be a detective inspector?*

Max had left early for a date. Larry was already ensconced in one of the pub's cubbies, nursing an ale and sideways watching a Manchester United game on the big screen. Max slid onto the leather bench opposite the older man.

"That old woman making your life miserable again?"

"Which one? Gladys, Bee, or Karen?"

Larry smiled. "The witches' coven, mate. I just got here myself. We won the case. Sort of. Got a greatly reduced sentence for the wanker. I almost felt sorry for the prosecution. There was a dearth of evidence to back up some of their charges. I'm surprised the CPS even sent that part to the Crown Court."

"Sometimes other stations just toss charges against the wall to see what sticks. Or they hope that the part having solid evidence convinces the jury that the rest of it's just as good. But you know all those tricks a lot better than I do."

"Aye, I've heard that your crowd is very careful. Makes my job tougher and your hours longer, I suppose. How's the new case going?"

“Frustrating, but that’s all I can say. Early days in the investigation, my sweet.”

“Are we still on for the trip to the Lake District?”

“I hope so. It’s probably hard for you to plan too.”

“Yes, it gets crazy at times. The PAs and PIs in the office slow things down a lot. The former fail to get enough schooling but often still think they’re lawyers; and the latter don’t like working for wages, as if they could all be free-lancers like Hercule Poirot.” Larry twisted his mustache as if he were Christie’s Belgian detective and then smiled.

“Let’s change the topic, shall we? I need sustenance—drink and food. Preferably a nice ale for the first, and don’t go all healthy on me for the second. We can do coffee and dessert back at my place. Can you stay the night? If so, I picked up a nice Irish whiskey on the way here.”

“As long as we get up early enough. I have the longer commute.”

“You can set the alarm accordingly and have first turn at the shower. Our next briefing is for late morning.”

Chapter Four

Sunday: The Handyman

There was a good reason the van was unmarked, of course: It was a hire-van from a local agency. And while the lessee's name Jack Smith could be a real one, Bee doubted it. There had been an American special counsel with that name a while ago who'd indicted that ex-US president for some scandal involving classified documents, one of his many indictments, but assuming the name was fake in this case when added to the lack of video from the hire-car agency's security videocam—it needed repair—meant that looking for Jack Smith in this case might become a challenge.

"I'd like you to come in and work with our police artist, Mr. Chan," Bee said to the hire-car agent, a Chinese immigrant who'd fled Hong Kong when the communists had taken over. "From your description, the artist might be able to sketch what this customer looked like."

"I don't have time to do that. I'm alone here. Who'd run the office, madam?"

"Okay, I'll have the artist come here to see you. Most of your business must come from early-morning or late-evening customers, I presume. What about one-thirty after lunch?"

"If you insist." He didn't seem too pleased with the situation.

"I can't force you to cooperate, sir, but as an upstanding member of the Bridgeton community, you should want to help your local police."

"I suppose. What did this customer do?"

"Have you read about the body we found on Friday?"

"Front page on the local broadsheet. I read it every day after my Chinese newspaper."

"There's your answer. You can possibly help us find the woman's murderer."

That's a bit too much information, Bee thought, but maybe it will motivate the bloke.

They soon had two pictures to circulate: The victim's, photoshopped up a bit so only expert eyes could determine the girl was dead; and the van's lessee's, who looked like a bald and bearded ex-pugilist with a livid scar on the right side of his face. They also had luck in finding that van driver.

Claus Samson was neither St. Nick nor the shorn biblical principal character. He had form and had served time in two different King Charlie's boarding houses. Bee and Karen had to wait for his duty solicitor to make an appearance, so they talked about the man's record.

"If he's the murderer, I'm at a loss for a motive," Bee said. "Seems to be a loner, his own boss. There's no connection to any gangs."

"And he wasn't too good at planning or concealing forensics evidence. Maybe just a solitary hoodlum who'd rather make a living by stealing rather than working."

"He would have been right at home in nineteenth century London," Bee said with a smile. "Forensics science was basically non-existent then beyond fingerprints and a few other things. You'd think Mr. Samson would know more about it, though."

"Maybe today's criminals didn't grow up watching *CSI*," Karen said.

Bee smiled and sipped her weak tea bought in the station's canteen. "I'm sure most criminals today are aware of what must be done to fool our SOCOs. Unfortunately for him, our guest is the exception rather than the rule."

They chatted about the case a bit longer and then went together to the interrogation room.

Bee shook hands with the duty solicitor, a new one for her, while Karen prepared the video recorder. Bee began with a soft touch.

“You’re not under arrest but cautioned, Mr. Samson.” For the record, she gave the usual spiel that applied to that circumstance. “You have asked for Mr. Townes to be here, though, and we have honored that request. Now we’d like to talk about your whereabouts on Friday night.”

“I was at a pub just off the high street, from eight to closing time. It’s walkable from my place so I can drink all I want and not have you rozzers hassle me about DUI.”

“The van you leased was seen at the scene of a crime, Mr. Samson. Where was it while you were at the pub?”

“Parked in front of my building. Leased it for a Saturday job. I do handyman work to make a living now.”

“But we found no tools in the van,” Karen said.

“On my street, you don’t leave anything valuable in a parked vehicle. Petty thieves will steal and sell it if only for a bottle or fags. It’s a shitty neighborhood, as you well know, but living there’s all I can afford.”

“So, the van was there all night?”

“When I staggered home in the early morning from the pub, it was gone. I was so drunk, I decided to wait ‘til later to report it stolen. Didn’t need to, though, strangely enough. The next morning it was back. Someone borrowed it. Now you plods have it, and I’m paying that Chinese wanker good money for nothing. I can’t catch a break.” He eyed his brief and then glared at the detectives. “What are you trying to fit me for?”

“We have witnesses who saw the van at a crime scene on Friday night,” Bee said. “It left that scene and returned to the motorway, where we got the plate number. All that led to you, who leased it.”

“That Chinaman should have told you that I only leased it for Saturday, but he made me pay for Friday too. I want to lodge a complaint against him.”

“You have no idea who borrowed the van?” Karen said.

“No. I was drunk, ma’am. I barely remembered how to walk to my place. Can’t your forensics people determine who borrowed it? They had enough skills to put me in gaol before. Like everything else, their expertise’s probably going to hell too. If we don’t get them damn Tories out of power, this country will rot away.”

Bee smiled. Politics were almost as much a topic of conversation as the weather; both were equally bad and getting worse according to most people. “Thank you for coming in, Mr. Samson. We’ll return the van to you as soon as possible.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll pay that feckin’ Chinaman for the time I wasn’t using the van. Whatever I make on my job will go to him otherwise. He’s a complete leech.”

After Samson and his solicitor departed, leaving Bee and Karen alone in the interrogation room, Karen said, “I’m guessing you think he was truthful?”

“I think being a handyman is the perfect way to case a house or business for a future robbery. We’ll give a heads up to the uniformed patrols and CIDs at other stations. But I do think he was truthful about the van. We now must find who borrowed it long enough to dump the victim.”

“Maybe finding out who she is will help us with that.”

“Possibly.”

Chapter Five

Sunday: The Tattoo

Bee couldn't remember which sergeant she'd assigned to oversee the mispers review—she was generally okay with her team exchanging assignments as long as they got done—but Max came into her office with news on that front.

“Seventeen mispers cases, five of them locals. Karen and I can handle the locals, I guess, but for the others we need your help. I'm sure the corresponding nicks won't pay attention to mere detective sergeants.”

“Okay. I'll handle the twelve non-locals. Do we have contact information for them all?”

Max looked at his list. “Couple of workplaces, spouses, parents, siblings—you know that you often find out that they've just done a runner and don't want to be found, right?”

“Maybe most of them. People decide to leave what they perceive to be an intolerable situation all the time. I can't blame them in a lot of circumstances. And the UK has a lot of places to hide, not to mention the nearness of Ireland and Europe. But let's get to it.”

Bee knew police contacts around the country she'd developed at the Met would make it easier for her to handle the non-local cases, as Max had implied, but pursuing those contacts meant calling in some favors she might regret losing in the future, or asking for favors she might have to return someday. *Part of the job*, she thought.

Using those old police contacts made it easy to get through all twelve mispers cases in another way, though: By leaving to the contacts the more time-consuming tasks of tracking down the status of the indicated mispers. She was soon able to consider other issues.

Bee first went over the PM report again. The pictures of the victim's tattoo now caught her eye. Even with her limited computer skills, she was able to expand one and crop it down to a decent and full close-up of the entire inkwork comprised of a cartoon duck with an olive branch. *So...now what? What do I do with it?*

She remembered some software Max had shown her how to use, basically freeware designed for facial recognition when trawling databases. *Can I use it to find a match for a tattoo?*

That freeware came with a brief description that included one of those ubiquitous FAQs page. One FAQ applied: “Can I use the software to find similar images?” The answer was yes. The program could search any database quickly for images and find any match of 85% or more. There was a technical explanation of exactly what that meant, but Bee ignored it.

She first applied the software to search for a match in HOLMES, the police database. A long wait for no match, but that wasn't a surprise. That tattoo wasn't something a felon would get in prison. She then tried several online catalogs from commercial tattoo salons in the area where the customer could choose the image they wanted. These went faster, but again no result. She then remembered Carlos talking about how certain gangs and musical groups often sported similar tattoos now. Unfortunately, if the musicians were in a band, the band's fans might also use the band's tattoos, so she didn't know what to expect in the latter case.

She tried some known gangs first; no luck. Just for the hell of it, she tried a list of rock groups. She found that the local rock band “The Ugly Ducklings” had combined a repeated image of a Daffy Duck look-alike—could that be a copyright infringement?—turning three of them into female ducks (indicated by the pink bows in their top feathers), with the center duck ensconced in a heart and sporting an olive branch, to create an amusing logo for the group. The

software determined that the logo and the tattoo were an 89% match if she only considered the central duck. And the band had a website with the same logo that offered a contact email.

She couldn't believe her luck. *Team members will think I'm a computer geek! And Carlos will have a good laugh.*

She sent an email to the band's website with the cleaned-up photo of the victim's face and her tattoo's image attached. *In for a chance, Bee.* She didn't expect any response.

But that evening she got one from the band's leader, Harry Wilson.

On Monday, the band leader came into the station. The duty sergeant ushered Harry Wilson into an interrogation room and then called Bee. She saw immediately that "The Ugly Ducklings" leader's tattoo was on his shoulder and featured three female ducks. *Is he supposed to be the central duck in the group's tattoo? Celebrating your ducky little harem, are you?*

His long brown hair looked more like a young woman's shoulder-length do except for the few streaks of gray. He was dressed in a muscle-shirt, showing off his bulging biceps; faded jeans, frayed at the knees; and old, stained trainers. Bee liked his intelligent blue eyes sparkling with mischief but almost hiding below his bushy eyebrows. She pegged him as an older bloke who was still trying to look young.

Harry was slouching, looking bored, and staring at the tabletop's unsanitary decoration of coffee and tea rings embroidered with carved initials when she'd entered the interrogation room with Karen—her new substation had inherited some old furniture, while other older ones had replaced what they donated with new furniture. He perked up and smiled at the two detectives, though.

The station, the newest found between London and Oxford, was a scaled-down version of many others and was already several years old: The basement contained IT services, holding cells, and a canteen; found on the ground floor were various meeting rooms including those used for interviews and interrogations, accessed through the building's entrance "guarded by" the duty sergeant at his high desk and small offices for the custody sergeants; on the next floor was the open-plan area of the CID with desks for the detectives, and it continued on to offices for the DCI, DI, the press liaison, and the Super who rarely was there; and on the top floor there was space for the SOCOs' labs and offices, the AROs, and showers and loos for all personnel. When new, there seemed to be plenty of space; now everyone felt crowded and couldn't help wondering why the Super had so much space when he was hardly ever there. All the detectives saw more of the press liaison, who was usually present and coached any briefing to the media hacks, but she was more like the Super's personal staff as well.

"Oh yes, now we're talkin'," he said with a wide smile. "Two lovely birds among the other ugly buzzards as a feast for this ugly duckling's eyes. Who woulda guessed? Policing's finally coming into the 21st century, I dare say."

Bee ignored that—a *compliment to get them on his side, or natural meet-your-public tactics?*—but she still winked at Karen, figuring the compliment was more for her. Bee couldn't place the accent—in London, one heard them all—but she suspected that the rocker had called many places home, if he'd ever had one. She gave Karen another glance; her sergeant now seemed intrigued by their visitor.

"Thank you for coming in, Mr. Wilson," Bee said and then made introductions, after which she said, "You told our duty sergeant that the woman we're looking for is Patty Robertson. Please tell us about her."

“Musically, I play the guitar, compose songs, and sing them as well as old, standard rock classics. Patty does all that and better, but she has no business sense. She can sing just about any song in her husky contralto, making it her own. I heard her do “Habanera” from *Carmen* once as a joke. Never heard it done better! She’s fabulous at the piano and guitar, has the voice of an angel, and a volume to match Janis Joplin’s in her prime, if needs be. We’ve been working together for a while. She’s missing now. For our band, that’s like a football team losing its star striker. At our gigs, we’re now hobbling along without her, so we need her back.” He sat straighter in his chair and tapped the table nervously. “That local rag asked, ‘Have you seen this woman?’ I guess someone else is also missing her? In any case, she’s the person you’re looking for.”

“No, Mr. Wilson, I’m afraid we have bad news for you. The police asked our local broadsheet to print that because we needed to ID her. Your Patty Robertson was a murder victim.”

“No, no!” He buried his face in his hands. Bee waited. When he looked up again, eyes teary, he said, “We all told her to go to the police. I know who might have killed her, damn him! The whole band does, but only some of us saw him hassle her. This eejit began to chat her up, didn’t get anywhere, and then started to make obscene calls at night. I told him to cease and desist at the club even before that, or we’d beat the crap out of him, but then he never returned and started to call her at all hours.”

“Do you have a name?”

“No, that’s the problem. He probably lied to us anyway. I’d know him if I saw him, though, but no one knew his name.” Harry wiped away some tears. “That poor, innocent bird. Damn! Damn! We should have taught the yob a lesson, nipped it in the bud. I’ll—we’ll do anything to make that arse pay for what he’s done!”

“We still have some work to do then and could use your help. First, I’d like a detailed description of when and how this low-life badgered Patty. Second, I’d like you to tell us everything you know about her: Where she calls home, who her relatives and other friends are, and so forth. I also want to know everything about you and your other band members as well.”

“You can’t believe that any of us helped that lowlife! We all loved Patty.”

“People have enemies in their past who go after them by hurting, in this case, murdering, the ones they love,” Karen said. “We see it all the time unfortunately.”

“Yes, maybe in her past. I don’t know the details, but I know she had an unhappy childhood.”

“We need that information.” Bee could see that Harry was quite upset. “And here comes the hard part: I’d like you and your band members to look through police reports in case you can spot her killer; he might have some form. If that fails, I’d like you and the rest who met this wanker to help our police artist make a sketch of him.”

“Oh, we’ll gladly do all that. Any band member who won’t will get their arm twisted by me personally until they do.” Tears were glistening in his expressive eyes again.

“Tell me, Harry, if you don’t mind, were Patty and you an item?” Karen said.

“I wish. Like I said, she’d had an unhappy childhood, and that included daddy issues, I believe. Kept herself to herself most of the time. She also wasn’t all that friendly with the fans, especially male fans, maybe as a result? She could emote and be sexy on stage but that was all an act. Music was her only love: Melody, chords, rhythms, lyrics. Keeping herself to herself like a lot of creative people, I suppose. That might explain why no big-time producer or agent ever ‘discovered her,’ as they say. I often thought she didn’t want to be discovered; she didn’t want

the adulation or the fame. ‘Twas a unique and creative bird, Inspector.” Harry took out a wrinkled handkerchief and had a good blow. “We’ll have to disband the group. I don’t think we can go on without her.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Six

Previous Week: At the Club

Patty Robertson had always loved music; she loved to sing and had learned to play an electric guitar and piano by the time she became a teenager. It was her only escape from a hellish homelife that she often dreamed about escaping.

Even as a precocious young girl mature beyond her years, she'd been in demand at local functions in and around her poor London neighborhood. She never made lead singer in any band—couldn't say she'd ever tried—but as a member of several fledgling and struggling rock groups, she'd had steady gigs as a backup musician and singer, usually in a trio or quartet, sometimes all girls, other times mixed. From clubs in London to upriver communities, she'd made enough to even save a bit.

Friday and Saturday nights at *The Eagle's Nest*, a club in Bridgeton just off the main motorway that meandered through the lower Thames Valley on its way to Oxford, were typical. Happy audiences welcomed "The Ugly Ducklings," her current band that played rock classics, oldies, and soft rock, and even a few heavy metal numbers, originals, and others. She liked performing the last best because she could play the electric piano and belt out a few solo verses a la classic rock stars' styles of Janis Joplin, Natalie Merchant, or Grace Slick, a bit modernized, of course. Their stay at *The Nest* so far of two weeks was their longest gig and had been renewed for two more. They were beginning to have a following, and the punters weren't all locals either.

The Nest was small and provided a cozy and intimate setting for "The Ducklings" style of music. With a group their size, the small stage was crowded, but there was still room for dancing in front of it when customers got in the mood. Most just listened while nursing drinks and eating snacks. Originally the building had been used for a busy roadside café, which meant easy parking in the large car park, a large kitchen off to the side of the bar, and bathroom facilities and two offices off to the other side. In the back, there was a large area for storing supplies and a delivery platform with a level that matched the level of most lorries. The new owner had invested in many improvements, so the new was mixed with the old but well-matched. Harry the band leader always thought that his group was contributing to the owner's success and should be paid more, but he hadn't approached the owner about that yet.

Men and even some women would try to chat Patty up during the band's breaks, but she'd always avoided any close relationships. She hoped to one day be a lead singer in a band, maybe even "The Ducklings" if they hit it big. But she wasn't about to take just any old offer: She wanted work that would challenge her more.

One punter at *The Nest* became too insistent one night, though—hands-on insistent. Harry put the pest in his place, but he'd returned on subsequent nights. When Harry saw the hatred for Patty on his pasty fat face caused by her rejection of his advances and how he booed her by yelling "Patty Cakes" and stamping his feet after some numbers, Harry told the club's bouncer to eject the eejit and advised Patty to go to the police. The bouncer, a gentle giant of a man agreed and gave Patty a number to call.

"You blokes are making too much of this," Patty said. "He's just an arse with shite for brains."

But then she started receiving obscene phone calls late at night. Finally losing patience, she promised Harry when they finished rehearsing on Thursday to call the police Friday morning before their early afternoon rehearsal.

By Friday afternoon, Patty hadn't shown up at *The Nest*. The other two girls who sang backup with her said that she'd left early that morning about ten-ish and hadn't been seen since. They thought she might have gone to the police. The band leader first called the station the bouncer had recommended but got no joy from its duty sergeant, and then he went with the drummer to the boarding house where Patty and the other two girls were staying. The nice old Irish woman Mrs. Murphy, who ran the place and knew all about the late hours the women kept at *The Nest*, hadn't seen Patty come in or go out recently. She had no idea which police station had been Patty's target destination but guessed it would be the nearest one, but which one that would be became a matter of unresolved debate because Patty would have taken public transportation, making distances and times a bit ambiguous.

"I know a few plods," the old woman said. "A DI even stayed here a while ago. But Patty wouldn't know her. Sorry, blokes. You need to check a few police stations in the area, I guess. Nice tats, by the way."

Harry and Rex the drummer had smiled. "We'll have to track her down some other way," Rex said.

Harry knew Rex was itching to return to *The Nest* and get on with rehearsal. *But what would that be like without Patty?* "Did she look frightened?" Harry said to Mrs. Murphy.

"Don't see much of her, to be honest. She's the perfect guest. No trouble at all. She did get some weird phone calls; she told me about them one morning at breakfast. I told her to be careful. Some nutters can be violent lowlifes always ready to pull out a knife on a girl."

"We'll call some more stations," Harry said. "Not like Patty to do a runner, especially considering we have a rehearsal, unless she's really scared."

"You never know," Mrs. Murphy said. "Ain't the Big Smoke around here this far upriver, but you'll find some sleazy characters anywhere these days. Just read the local broadsheet. They put all that on the first few pages 'cause the public loves them scandalous stories. I mostly ignore them. I hope you find your band member, gents. Nice girl. Here she was quiet-like all the time, but I guess she belts out the songs?"

Rex smiled. "That she does, ma'am. One of the best, I'd say."

As the two bandmembers plopped into Harry's old Morris to go to the club, Rex said, "Do you think she did a runner?"

"Don't know, mate. I'll make some more calls. But you and I both know nicks well enough. Finding a copper there who knows everything going on is as rare as us having a hit song in the EU. And anyone can get lost in the plods' triage efforts. I had to find my own niece once."

"What did she do?"

"Nothing more than get lost in the Big Smoke. She was lucky some pedo or dealer in drugs didn't snatch her. Kids do crazy things."

Rex smiled. "And Patty's just a big kid. Let's get back. We need to rehearse."

Harry's guilt about not being more proactive in his search for Patty would be somewhat mitigated by the realization that by the time he saw the article in the broadsheet and talked to that detective, Patty was already dead. That realization didn't make him feel much better, though.

He'd have to have a serious chat with the other band members. Could they go on without Patty? It was clear that their substitute pianist and guitarist had neither the musical nor vocal skills of Patty Robertson. Or the musical spirit, for that matter.

Chapter Seven

Monday: At the Substation

Now that they had a name and some information about their victim, Bee's team could try to find out more about her. The band members didn't know much—Bee thought they lived in the present and focused on the future, basically their gigs, and didn't worry too much about anyone's past. They did trickle into the station to provide the information she'd asked Harry Wilson to make them provide, to look at photos, and sit with the police artist.

They got started on delving more into Patty's troubling family history with a surprise visit from a concerned citizen, Reverend Thomas Peterson, vicar of a local Anglican church. Karen took him into an interview room, and Bee joined the two there after Karen's call.

"I knew her as Martha," the vicar said, "but I was sure that wasn't her name. My Catholic counterparts aren't the only religious leaders poor people use as mental health professionals, detectives. When troubled, they can't afford a pro, so they bend the ears of their priests, vicars, imams, whatever." He sighed. "She didn't attend many of my sermons, though."

Bee nodded. "But she sought your help. Why?"

"She felt guilty about fleeing her terrible situation at home to start a musical career because that meant abandoning her siblings to an uncaring and brutalizing grandmother. The details vary, but many people, especially young adults, find themselves in similar situations. In my day, males in that situation would join the military. I'm not sure and don't like to think about what females might have done then or do now. Maybe marry early and create more dysfunctional families?"

"You were a chaplain?" Karen said.

"Aye, that's the official name for it, a non-combat position, of course. You really must be a spiritual and psychological counselor for the troops, many of them coming from these bad situations. I saw the same stress in Martha that I saw in our blokes overseas—I mean Patty. She suffered from PTSD caused by her family's situation—battle fatigue, near starvation at times, desperation—it was all there."

Bee nodded. "So why did you come to see me, Reverend? What can you offer that will help us to find Patty's murderer?"

"Only a name, Inspector. Your plea in that broadsheet asked for any information that might be of use. She gave her tormenter a name: Eagle. Probably a nickname and not his real name. She wouldn't go beyond that when I pressed her."

"Eagle? Yes, it sounds like a nickname."

"Her exact words were: 'The Eagle has sharp talons.' At first, I thought it was a metaphorical name for the entertainment business; then I thought it might be a reference to the club where she worked."

"Yes, it could be anthropomorphizing either one."

He shrugged and touched his head. "She might have been a bit mad, I dare say, damaged by her childhood. But I got the idea Eagle was a real person. I know it's not much of a clue, but I'd feel guilty if I didn't come forward with it, more for the fact that someone should check on her siblings' situation that worried her so much."

"We'll do that," Bee said.

Max found Patty's name buried in the foster care records, his success only possible because of her demise. She and her siblings had first been abandoned by two different fathers

and then their mother. The grandmother eventually took them in. Reports from several social workers painted a picture of neglect caused by all three older adults in Patty's life. The grandmother was young enough to take care of them, but apparently, she wasn't exactly a responsible adult either. The workers suspected most of the funds the old woman received weren't used to care for the children. Drugs and alcohol abuse had started with the grandmother.

"We'll have to look into that situation," Bee said. Her desk phone rang; she looked at the number—Glasgow PD, MacGregor—held up a finger, and then answered.

Bee didn't know DI Bob MacGregor as well as she knew her usual contacts. Never met him, in fact. She'd seen the name mentioned on some extradition requests originating in his nick in Scotland when she was slaving at her job in the Met. Curious, she took the call.

After introducing himself, the heavily accented and gravelly voice said, "Your duty sergeant told me you're SIO for the Patty Robertson case, Inspector Berkeley." Bee acknowledged that. "I saw your artist's sketch of a person of interest you want to find. I'm sure his name's Daniel Wright, aka Daniel or Danny, if I'm not mistaken. I sent him to gaol several years ago. He got out only a few years back. I haven't seen him in a while, so he might be down in your area."

Bee profusely thanked the Scot for calling and then asked him for more details.

"Nae, lass, not advisable over the phone because there's far too much to pass on to ye. I'll be sending ye all that we know here about this lowlife as an email attachment. He's got form from here to Edinburgh, he has. Family hails from Belfast donkey's years ago. 'Violent narcissist,' 'tis a complimentary description of the little thug."

"Call a team meeting," Bee said to Max after disconnecting with MacGregor. "We might have Patty's killer all wrapped up and tied in a bow as a gift to us."

Their efforts would now be focused on finding Dan Wright, wherever he was and whatever name he now went by. Was he the Eagle's talon? That remained to be seen. He would now become their prime suspect as Patty's heckler, caller, and murderer.

At the briefing, Max was the first to comment after she made her spiel. Karen was handing out copies of what MacGregor had sent, which included real photos, fingerprints, and DNA records, along with their artist's sketch the band members had fine-tuned. The match wasn't perfect but good enough to seriously consider Wright as their main suspect.

"Can we link any of the obscene calls with him to pin things down?"

"I have no idea," Bee said. "We don't have her or his mobile. And there might be several in use."

"Yes, he would probably use a pay-as-you-go unless he's really stupid," Karen said.

Everyone knew what that meant: Unless there was a confession, the threatening calls the killer had made were basically useless as evidence. They might point away from Wright, though. Bee didn't want to consider that but had to keep that possibility in mind.

"Okay, let's get his real photo to the media and out into the community," Bee said.

"Someone besides people in the club must have seen Mr. Wright."

Max waved the sheets. "No information here about what he did in Glasgow—legal work that is, not criminal activity."

"Page twenty-two," Karen said. "He was an auto mechanic. He put luggage trackers in rich toffs' expensive rides and then later stole them after they parked somewhere. A few times an owner caught him in the act and tried to stop him and then got clocked. He's quite a violent little creep, but so far, he hasn't killed anyone."

“That we know of. Patty might have been his first murder.”

Bee smiled. Karen was a fast reader. Most at the briefing were still perusing the information MacGregor had sent. She had to admit the description of Wright’s past *modus operandi* was in small print and buried towards the document’s end. And everyone realized that description didn’t necessarily correlate with any of his recent activities.

“What about other stalking cases?” a DC said. “They would give us an idea about how the wanker thinks as well.”

Bee smiled because she loved it when team members got creative. “Good idea. Nothing in the material from Glasgow, but let’s look into that for activities around here. It might help us be a bit more proactive.”

Karen had realized the implications of Bee’s comment. “Do you think he’ll go after another woman?”

“That’s certainly something to fear if he’s done it before. We might even be able to predict what kind of potential victim he’d like to pursue.”

“Pretty and talented young rockers?” Max said.

“Maybe. Or women with similar hair. Sexy contraltos. Whatever. Anything we learn about him could be useful. By the way, let’s check auto shops. Uniforms can help with that. I’ll get on the phone and query other local nicks. Obviously, this bloke doesn’t mind moving around. We know he once operated across lower Scotland and now he’s skulking around here. For all we know, he’s a one-man crime wave moving around the entire UK.” She thought a moment. “Maybe even the Irish Republic as well.”

Chapter Eight

Monday Night: At Carlos's House

"You're home early," Carlos said, entering his little house and seeing Bee in his little galley kitchen. "What's cookin', *mi amor*?"

"Lamb chops, wild rice, and Brussels sprouts," she said. "I needed a domestic break from all our depressing casework. Sometimes I feel that poor musician's friends will never get any closure. The more information we get, the more complicated the case seems to be."

He gave her a hug and a kiss, tasting the red wine she'd been sipping. "I'll have one of those, *chiquita*, but I'm not too keen about the sprouts."

"You have never had them made by yours truly before, broiled with garlic and lamb drippings. You've got to at least try them. They're good for you, big man."

"Just Irish cabbage in miniature. We rarely had fresh vegetables in the Royal Marines, you know, not overseas, and we survived."

"I suppose a healthy glow might become dangerous if it turns soldiers into easier targets. You're not overseas anymore, though, and you're not getting any younger. I want you to be around for a while."

The ARO held up crossed fingers. "Only difference with overseas duties is that our combat missions here aren't as frequent. To compensate, the bad blokes here are often better armed than we are."

She sighed. "And that's with our strict gun laws. Think of the Wild West aka Yankee-land. I'm sure we'll soon have an epidemic of ghost guns too, like they do. I'm glad we don't have to pay for our life insurance policies." *Not that they were much good*, she thought. The families of respected police officers often received some pity from their comrades via a GoFundMe campaign—same for serious illnesses because, to her knowledge, the NHS never offered participations in a medical trial on the basis of lost loved ones.

They soon sat down to a feast. Carlos did an acceptable job with the sprouts and devoured the chops and rice. "You can cook for me anytime, *chiquita*."

"My culinary skills and offerings are as limited as my time. Maybe you can teach me a few exotic recipes. At least we both like Chinese and Indian takeaway."

He laughed. "Not many people in our lines of work are good enough chefs to seek work in a Michelin four-star restaurant. Some ethnic dishes take a lot of time to prepare. The woman of the house in the old country spends all her day cooking."

"Child-rearing and house-cleaning are squeezed into her days too. Men are generally pampered too much."

Quickly deciding to discontinue that topic, Carlos said, "What's for dessert?"

"More pampering if you help load the dishwasher. I need some loving, *mi hombron*."

"Why is everyone so glum?" Bee said as she entered the CID's open-plan area the next morning a bit later than usual on her way to her office.

She'd noticed something amiss the moment she'd reached the top of the stairs and pushed through the double doors. *Come to think of it, even Eddie didn't welcome me with his usual hand wave.*

"It's Gladys," Karen said. "She was in an accident."

"Is she okay?"

"In A&E's post-op at the hospital," Max said. "They don't know if she'll survive."

“Damn! We should keep on top of that.”

“Melody is calling every so often. She’ll keep us informed.”

“Sounds bad. Good wishes and prayers are in order, people. Might be a long recovery, so we’ll have to visit her often to cheer her on. Hospitals are depressing.”

“If too long, they’ll probably need to find a temporary replacement,” the ever-practical Karen said.

The others groaned. This CID group was unusual. Everyone liked the fifty-plus-year-old DCI Gladys Harkness, from detectives to uniformed patrol and all the way up to the police VIPs. Gladys defended and motivated them all and had won Bee’s love and respect.

Gladys knew all about Bee’s relationship with Carlos. The DCI could have frowned upon it or even tried to stop it; instead, she approved. That was because she respected AROs and SOCOs as well, even though the latter were often private contractors. They were all part of the team, and Gladys knew good policing was a team sport.

“In that case, I’d better ensure that we can get a temp we can work with,” Bee said. “Especially now. We’ve got a baffling murder investigation going on.”

“Um, that problem has already been solved,” Max said. “Sort of. The Super’s bringing in someone from the Met.”

Bee frowned. “Who? I know a lot of them. And whoever they are won’t know beans about policing upriver. I sure didn’t. I’m still learning with the help of all of you.”

“I jotted the name down,” Max said, ignoring her confession and praise. “Hold on a sec.” He went to his desk. “Ah, here it is. Roy Westwood. He’s a DCI who’s nearing retirement from some London vice squad. Might not be happy with the new assignment, I dare say.”

Bee groaned. “That man should have retired years ago.” She touched her forehead. “Best description of him: Nasty, crazy, and misogynistic eejit.” She didn’t care if someone reported her for saying that either.

“Seems like you know him well,” Karen said, her frown matching Bee’s.

“Well enough. We were on a few special cases together, and those few were almost too much for my mental health. He believes LGBTQ people are pawns of the Devil; kerb-crawlers can’t possibly be victims; any teen can be a rapist or killer who should be hanged like in the old days; and any working woman, especially female coppers, should be at home cooking for their man and minding a brood of his children instead.”

“A real throwback then?” Max said, who’d cringed at the first characteristic.

“Horse-and-buggy-style detective from the days of gas lights. Oh, and I forgot: We’re all expected to make him look good, and he expects to get all the credit.”

“But maybe someone from a vice squad could help a lot in solving our murder case,” Melody said.

“Maybe,” Bee said. She sighed. “I misspoke. Rewind and erase. Let’s keep open minds for now. He might just bide his time and not take a very active role. One can only hope.”

They spent the rest of the day spinning their wheels and getting nowhere on the case.

Unfortunately, Bee met her old nemesis late that evening. She’d wasted time helping to look for evidence of Wright’s recent activity in England, not Scotland, as well as trying to match up Wright with that ‘Eagle’s talon’ description. She’d had no success. She’d done all that in the original station in the civic center where she’d had more IT help. Upon returning to her substation, she found Westwood sitting in her office.

“Got lost in our huge police substation, Roy?” He was sitting at her desk in her chair as if he owned both. “FYI: Gladys’s office is next door.”

Roy Westwood was a small bloke with a small man’s complex. In other words, he thought he could build himself up at the expense of others by knocking them down, especially women. Bee could imagine him being a reluctant yes-man in some criminal gang who enjoyed torturing any competition who was taller than he was. She knew that was part of the problem he had with her. She wondered what he’d do if he ever met Carlos who looked shorter than he really was only because of his wide shoulders and muscular yet gentle loving arms.

She’d had some fun once after introducing Roy to her husband Rodney. As a barrister, her dear husband had the habit of invading a bloke’s personal space, and his slight height advantage over Roy only exacerbated its effectiveness. She’d watched her Rodney march Roy Westwood across the room—unintentionally as always—simply be taking a small step towards Roy, who would then back up because his egotism defined his own personal space as too large. It was comical to see because neither man had realized what was occurring. When Roy was backed against a wall and feeling trapped, Bee saved him by taking Rodney to meet her immediate boss in the Met, thus ending the comedy skit.

He waved a hand at her cluttered desktop. “Same old Bee Berkeley. I knew I’d find all sorts of information about the murder case here, so why carry it all to my new office?”

“I’ll be generous and offer to save you some of your valuable time. I’ll give you a personal briefing. It will be easier if we go to the crime board.”

“I hate to hold you up, but that could be useful. My, my, you’ve become so friendly since we had to work together in London.”

“I’ve become more patient and tolerant with old age. You should try it sometimes. Besides, I’m afraid you’ll lose some of my notes that are here on my desk.”

“Ah, I misspoke. You’re as direct and caustic as ever. Okay, lead the way, Inspector Berkeley.”

To Roy’s credit, he listened to her spiel attentively, and his interruptions were only to ask good questions.

At the end of the briefing, he said, “Seems like this Patty Robertson was living dangerously. I’m guessing that young bird was into drugs, binge drinking, indiscriminate sexual relationships—these rockers aren’t exactly angels, are they?”

“I never alluded to any of that, Roy, and you can read the damn autopsy to prove you’re wrong. In brief, there were no signs of alcohol or drugs abuse. She wasn’t a virgin, but most women aren’t at that age. And her band leader and mates said Patty was a clever and creative musician; they thought highly of her.”

“All Devil’s children, I imagine.”

Same old holier-than-thou Roy. “The band leader is a vicar’s son who often still plays the organ at his father’s church. You don’t know shite about this case, Roy, so let’s end this briefing right now.”

“Confrontational. Is that the way it’s going to be?”

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

“You’ve always been confrontational, Bee, acting on your own too much and failing to take orders.”

“You know very well that my record contradicts that. I’ve always been a team player, even when the team leader is some supercilious arse from the Met.”

“Only when it’s convenient for you. And you might be a tyrant now, as far as I know, being the only duck in the pond here at this substation.”

“I’ll remind you that I’m the SIO of this investigation and not your slave. Instead of going after my case, why don’t you save your energy and continue to pal around with the police VIPs here like you did in London for so many years?”

“Bollocks! Let me assure you that I don’t have either the patience, energy, or desire to take over anything, Bee, so don’t worry. I’ll soon be out of your life again. By the way, how’s Rodney?”

“You don’t even know, do you?”

“Know what? I would have thought Barrister Berkeley, Esquire, would at least be an MP by now.”

“Why do you think I’m here, Roy?”

“To be honest, I didn’t know you were. I’m just here doing a favor for an old friend, your Super. Why are you here? Couldn’t take the stress at the Met?”

“Have a good evening. And, if I ever see you in my office again, I’ll remind you of how good my martial arts skills still are.”

She returned to her office, collected her purse, and walked out of CID and the station.

“Not your favorite person, I presume,” Carlos said after hearing about Bee’s encounter with Roy Westwood.

He was serving some Thai food he’d picked up. It would be a change from Chinese and Indian. *But does he realize it has lots of vegetables?*

As if to answer that thought, he said, “I took your lecture to heart, *mi amor*. Lots of vegetables go into some of these Siamese dishes, but the Pad Thai sounded interesting to this old tom cat.”

“I’m not familiar with Thai cuisine. You can explain it to me as we eat. As for Roy, the sooner he retires, the better off my team and I will be. I think I managed to tie him up with some verbal rope. I’m hoping the Super has explained or will explain the close relationship we have with Gladys. If Roy has half a brain—and that’s not clear, to be honest—he’ll not upset the applecart, or he could cause a revolt. I for one would go straight to the Super and complain.”

“Um, give him a chance. An old friend at his last nick told me that he’s mellowed a bit with age.”

“Like old, moldy cheese, or wine turning to vinegar?”

Carlos smiled. “You have a barbed tongue sometimes, *chiquita*. I’ve imagined you as DCI if Gladys can’t return, but rocking the boat might nix that.”

“I’ve made contacts in academia. I can always teach. That might be preferable if the politics here become unbearable.”

He laughed. “Then you’d be battling students’ antics and egos. That could be worse. But Professor Bee Berkeley does sound good, I dare say. I’d go to all the faculty functions just to see all the female students looking to hook up.”

“And males too. A lot goes on at universities now—sex, drugs, dances, and other functions, and so forth. And a lot of it we couldn’t possibly understand because of our ages. I see that even in the young police officers like Karen and Max. Shall we call it a generational disconnect?”

“Maybe, but who said that the only thing constant is change?”

Bee's brow wrinkled. "Patty Robertson often sang Dylan's 'The Times Are a-Changin',' I've been told. That says it just as well, but your quote comes from the Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus."

Carlos's jaw dropped. "And you criticize Max for being an erudite?"

She shrugged. "Never criticism, and I don't tease him as badly as some do. And I just liked that quip. A corollary might be that you just have to wait a bit for things to change for the better." She blew him a kiss. "Like my finding you."

"Feeling's mutual, *chiquita*. After splitting from my wife, I'd sworn to avoid relationships forever."

"Positive change takes time, Carlos. And you're too much a romantic Latino."

SAMPLE

Chapter Nine

Friday Afternoon, a Week Earlier: A Deadly Ride

Patty didn't know the bloke well, but she was happy to accept the ride. She was running late and hadn't yet called the police about her caller. Moreover, the club was a fair walk from her boarding house, and there was a drizzle accompanying the fog that made the cold even more penetrating. She preferred boarding houses to hotels because they were homier—a sane home she'd never had as a child—and generally less expensive, catering not to tourists but business travelers. And hers was nearer to work than any third-rate hotel, which is all she could've afforded.

"You missed your turn," she told the driver.

"I'm taking an alternate route that has less traffic at this time. The exodus from the Big Smoke begins early on Fridays."

She recognized the truth in that, so she rested her head on his flashy ride's seat rest and thought of some of the new numbers they planned to play that evening and would have to rehearse a bit. She and the other band members, especially Harry, were still debating which ones would feature her at guitar or as a backup singer and which ones would have her at the electric piano. She thought they might want some drum and piano solo interludes for the latter interspersed with the full ensemble playing.

Harry was a good bloke and a good singer and guitarist, but he was often telling her that she had to keep her eyes open for other opportunities to move up in the music world, especially with more popular bands. *Is he just like a big brother looking out for my future? Or is he trying to get rid of me?*

She knew she could only go so far with "The Ugly Ducklings"; they were stuck in the club and pub circuit for now, barely able to make a living. A performer had to move beyond that—at least make some demos that got played on the radio or videos for the internet sites and the telly. Adele had shown that a female performer didn't have to look like a movie star shaking her bum and boobs at the audience. Patty did a bit of that with "The Ducklings" but wasn't comfortable doing it. She preferred the low-key performance style of Alicia Keyes. She smiled at that partial pun but thought, *Do I really want to be famous?*

She suddenly realized that they were heading upriver and no longer in a direction towards the club. They were generally winding their way towards Oxford using rural roads.

"Are you lost? How can you not know where the club is?"

"We're early. We have enough time to have some fun together at a little place I own."

She immediately got suspicious of the older man's intentions. "What kind of fun?"

"I've admired you for some time, Patty. It's time for you to get to know me better."

"I'm no fourteen-year-old innocent. Head for the club, or I'm jumping out of this car."

He ignored that threat and turned into a narrow lane. "My little hideaway is up this way. We can relax a bit before the rehearsal."

He had to slow down because the lane was full of potholes and ruts. She threw open her door and jumped out, hitting the ground hard and rolling. She got up, though, and started running back the other way.

"Stop, you stupid little bitch! We're meant to be together!"

She didn't stop, but he could run faster.

Later Patty's assailant called a bloke who'd done some shoddy but cheap work at his hideaway. "I need a van. Are you leasing one?" He knew the lout couldn't afford to buy one because he'd showed up a few weeks ago in a leased one.

"I am. It's in front of my bedsit. But I'm off for some Friday relaxation, so fuck you. And why should I do you any favors? You tried to scam me out of what we'd negotiated for the job."

"I was paying you under the table, so I deserved a price reduction. That's illegal, marra. Live with it. I need to borrow that van."

There was a sigh. "You're not doing anything illegal with it, are you? If I get blamed for something you've done, I'll make you pay for everything in a very unpleasant way."

"I need it to do a chore."

There was a pause. "Okay, I'll leave the keys in my mailbox. Make sure you have the van back by the morning."

"It'll be there, all cleaned up and ready to go."

The line went dead. *Plonker!*

Patty's attacker had to walk a bit to get the van—parking was hard to find near the handyman's bedsit—but his chore was soon over. He'd timed it perfectly. After he left the area of the residence towers and returned the van, he was enjoying his good luck. Patty was dead—bad luck for her—but now no one would ever know who'd killed her.

She was a nobody, after all, a low-class slut without any close relatives as far as he knew. How could she not see that he'd given her a great opportunity? He had money now after his parents had disowned him for leaving his pregnant girlfriend at the altar. He was independent and on his way up...finally. It had taken some time to find his niche in life, but success was knocking at his door. He could have all the hens he liked, classy ones. Birds like wannabe rock star Patty Robertson were as common as cockroaches. He'd show them all!

Chapter Ten

Tuesday: More Interviews at the Substation

In the next morning's briefing, Bee asked for results and managed to get a few, not a good showing for their substitute DCI Roy Westwood, who attended. The search for Dan Wright continued, but some information about Patty's past before "The Ugly Ducklings" was available in the form of medical records.

She'd been in NHS facilities close to her seedy London home neighborhood several times for suspicious injuries as a child; how she'd acquired them wasn't clear, mostly because child services couldn't convince her to talk about them. She was the eldest child, but all the siblings ended up being raised by her grandmother after first the two fathers and then the mother abandoned them. Child services hadn't done more checks after that.

"Are the siblings and grandmother still around?" Bee said to the DC giving the report, Polly McAdams. "It might be useful to talk to them, even if we might need someone for child services there for the youngest siblings. Can you look into that?"

"I can help with that," Roy said, "if you have any problems. We had a few cases in Vice involving child abuse, so I know some of the people who work there."

"That would be great," Bee said. *Maybe my lecture didn't fall on deaf ears?* She turned her attention to Max, who was leading the search for Dan Wright now. "Keep searching for that bloke. He could have left this area after murdering Patty, of course, but he might only be in hiding."

"And changed his name wherever he's at," Karen said.

"Will someone visit one of our profilers to find out what might have turned him from being a simple car thief to stalker and murderer? I guess I'm saying we need background on him as well beyond what's in Glasgow's report." No one volunteered, and she knew from her own work, it wouldn't be an easy task.

"Looks like that's on you, Inspector Berkeley," Roy said. "Unless Gladys can suggest someone from her hospital bed."

"Going back to Karen's comment," Max said, "the name didn't ring a bell with any of the band members. No one at the club knew the heckler's name."

"And probably didn't want to know," Karen said.

"Probably never heard it," Bee said. "Which reminds me: Has anyone interviewed the bouncer? He gave Patty some good advice, seconding Harry and some of the band members. And he might be more observant than they are just from his training. Let's bring him in as well as the club's owner, even if someone's interviewed the latter. Either one might be the eagle's talon that we're looking for, if not Wright."

"I'll have some uniforms bring him in," Karen said.

"Too bad *The Eagle's Nest* only has security cams in the car park," Polly said. "We couldn't spot Wright there, so we don't have a plate number."

"He could have walked to the club," said another DC.

"If he was living nearby. I stayed in a boarding house when I first came here. Everything was walkable. A bit far from the club, though. Have we checked all of them in the area?" She was wondering if the eagle's talon was somehow associated with *The Eagle's Nest*. *The bouncer or the owner? Maybe Wright isn't our man?*

“Getting there,” said one of the PCs. “There are lots of them, from squalid to posh with a huge turnover. The commercial migration from the Big Smoke starts here and moves upriver as well as north and south. They come in from the east and west coasts as well. We’ll keep at it.”

Bee gave her usual pep talk and ended the briefing. As he walked away, Roy gave a little wave. *He behaved himself*, she thought. *Will he continue to do so?*

Bee didn’t like the owner of *The Eagle’s Nest*. Greg Elston was so full of himself that he thought he was God’s gift to women. He demanded to know why the police hadn’t found Patty’s killer.

“Do you people know how much this is going to cost me? If the band breaks up, I can recover, but for now I must continue to pay them, and frankly they’re sad shite without her. Harry and all of them are okay blokes, but I’m not running a charity.”

“Mr. Elston, people who waste our time don’t help us get results. DS Bloomfield told you why we need to talk to you. Let’s stay on track. What do you know about Patty’s past? According to Harry, Patty and you were friendly enough. Did she ever mention her past? How her stalker might be someone from that past whom she’d angered?”

“Her past’s irrelevant. She was the best draw *The Nest* has had in a long time. The band’s mediocre without her. Even when she was in backup mode, people focused on her. Many punters know talent, Inspector. And after numbers that featured her vocally or instrumentally, she often got a standing ovation. Sure, that’s only a crowd of maybe a hundred or so at *The Nest*, but they were loud. And they stayed. The more they stay, the more they drink and eat. Get my point?”

“Weren’t you afraid that someone would steal your featured band?” Karen said.

“Yeah, and Harry threatened me with that a time or two. He was trying to negotiate a raise. Now that’s out of the question. As the band’s leader, he has to be a businessman as well as a performer, of course. They don’t have an agent, you see. I’m not complaining. It was easier for me to negotiate a deal directly with him. Damn agents always take their cut.”

“Let’s return to the stalker,” Bee said. She slid the sketch and photo from Glasgow towards Greg. “Is this a good match?”

“Aye, that’s the wanker. He had some nerve trying to get it on with Patty. I thought she was a lesbo at first because she didn’t even give me a wink.” He put his hands inside his lapels to puff out his chest and emphasize his tailored three-piece suit. “And I’m a successful businessman. But she’s just leery of men. Harry told me she’d had daddy problems as a kid. I guess the old men in her life were real lowlifes. ‘Course, some people are born toffs and still turn out to be nutters. That’s what she was, Inspector: A very creative nutter. Most creative people are, I suppose. I could imagine her going solo like so many performers do—leave the band, you know—but she didn’t seem to be too keen about doing that. Strange kid, she was.”

Bee nodded, realizing that talking to Greg any longer would be a waste of time. If he had a beef with a band member, it would be with Harry. “Thank you for coming in, Mr. Elston. We’ll try to keep you informed.”

“Hell, I don’t need that. What I need is a new band with a star like ‘The Ugly Ducklings’ had in Patty.”

Rick “Rocky” Giordano, the club’s bouncer, was a larger version of Carlos, and he was such a gentle soul that Bee wondered how he’d landed in that kind of job. Like Carlos and Max, he was an ex-Royal Marine.

After questioning him a while, Bee concluded that he only confirmed what they already knew, including Patty's experiences at the club with the heckler. He was clearly a fan of "The Ugly Ducklings" and Patty Robertson.

Bee sent him on his way with the usual reminder to let them know if he remembered anything later that might help their investigation,

"Nice guy but more time wasted, Bee," Karen said after Rocky left.

The interrogation room's door opened a crack, and Max stuck his head in. "We've located the rest of Patty's family."

"Call the grandmother and set up an interview at her house," Bee said. "I want to learn about Patty's childhood."

"Bad, judging by records. Child Services has basically given up on the grandmother, although it seems the NHS hasn't tended to any of the siblings since Patty was old enough to leave."

"I still want to see what the situation is. If it's bad, I'll get the children into foster care to protect them. I'll give Child Services a heads-up, in fact. There's a lot of damage that can be done that's never seen by NHS nurses or doctors. Grab a pool EV and meet me in front."

"Will that get us into the city and back?"

"Yes, if it's fully charged."

The two officers had a bit of *déjà vu* when they pulled up in front of the building where Patty's family flat was—government housing, of course, probably with rent assistance. Both feared that neighborhood hooligans would do something to the car even though it was unmarked. The EVs' prices were still beyond what the poor people in that neighborhood could afford. There were plenty of old cars parked around, but Bee suspected they belonged to commuters parking anywhere they could to catch busses into the city.

The elevator wasn't in service, so they went up six flights to find themselves in a dark corridor filled with the noxious odors of cheap food and dysfunctional toilets. Karen rapped on the door and then stood beside Bee. They heard children fighting and wailing and an adult screaming. After repeating several times, the door opened slightly, and the wizened face of a balding old woman appeared.

"We understand you're the grandmother of Patty Robertson," Bee said. "We'd like to talk to you for a few moments. I'm Inspector Bee Berkeley and my companion here is Sergeant Karen Strong." Bee and Karen showed the woman their warrant cards.

"Don't know no Patty or Patricia," said the wrinklie. She tried to shut the door; Bee put her boot in to block that and then squeezed around the old hag. "You can't come in here without a warrant!"

"Probable cause, ma'am," Bee said over her shoulder to the harridan. She didn't know whether abused and wailing children were probable cause enough to intervene for Child Services, but she was willing to take the chance.

She went straight to the dark sitting room. Karen followed the irate woman. There were no children, but both officers had heard them crying and howling in pain.

"Laundry room," Karen said, moving the wrinklie gently aside.

Even though the woman looked frail, she had tried to block their path out of the small sitting room. "Put the cuffs on her, Karen, and sit her down."

Bee opened the laundry room's door and saw them all standing there: Four trembling children with teary eyes, the oldest maybe ten, the youngest maybe three, but how to tell their age for sure made difficult by the lack of nourishment and unbathed bodies.

“Hello. My name is Bee. Why don’t you come out and play in the sitting room? I love to watch children play.”

“Nana’s pissed,” said the oldest. The print left by a hard slap was still red on the child’s cheek, and there were bruises on his neck and arms. “She’s waiting for her drugs, and that makes her angry.”

“Don’t believe anything that little yob says,” the grandmother screamed from the sitting room. “He’s a wretched little liar like his mum.”

“Come on,” Bee told the children, taking the boy’s hand. “We won’t let Nana hurt you anymore.”

“I’ve not done nothin’ to no one,” Nana screamed again.

The children formed a line behind the oldest sibling, and Bee led them all to the sitting room that was only a bit brighter than the corridor outside the flat. She again invited them to play with their dirty, broken toys while they talked to the wrinklie. The youngest children went at it, but the oldest boy sat cross-legged next to Karen, who was busy on her moby, and listened intently.

“When did these children last eat, ma’am?” Bee said to the old woman.

“Carl there’s ‘sposed to feed ‘em. Ask the lying little bugger!”

“I’m asking you, ma’am, supposedly the responsible adult in this home. And why aren’t they in school?”

“No one to take them. I leave early to clean some toffs’ houses. It’s a ride on slow buses, you know. I don’t have the time to pamper my daughter’s four brats.”

“And where is your daughter?”

“Good question. She left a while ago.”

“And Patty?”

“Don’t know no Patty, like I said.”

Karen was now exploring. She went into the kitchen and soon showed Bee the makings of a marijuana fag in one of her hands and a bottle of gin in the other. Bee nodded. The harridan was so angry she hadn’t even registered what was going on.

Karen, who’d now been looking around the dark sitting room, said, “I dare say, this is a good picture of Patty and the other children here on the table. I suppose their mother took it?”

“That’s their mum in the shot. There’s no Patty!”

Karen took the picture out of its cheap frame. She turned it over and read, “‘Carl, David, Janet, Leon, and Patty.’ Their mother’s name is Victoria or Vicky, isn’t it?”

Nana seemed to deflate like a popped balloon. “Okay, Vicky shipped out and then Patty left me in the lurch as well. She got tired of poverty and taking care of her bratty sibs, I’m guessing, though I don’t reckon why she’d think that’s my chore. Left me in the lurch, both of them sluts. They prefer to spread their legs for any old wanker who’ll pay for a shag, I ‘spose. In Patty’s case, for old rock stars.”

“What you just said contradicts what the leader of Patty’s most recent band told us.” Bee winked at Karen. Carl smiled at the two detectives.

“Patty was known to be against a lot of things people associate with rock groups, ma’am,” Karen added. “She was only into her singing and playing piano and guitar.”

“She played instruments? Wherever did she learn to do that?”

“Lessons? Self-taught?” Bee said. “One would think that you would know and be proud of it, seeing how your own life has turned out. You apparently don’t know much about your granddaughter. You’ll have a lot of time to find out about her during your last lonely years.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“We now know you’re into the drink and drugs just like the children’s mum. We’ve evidence of that and of your abuse of these children, so we’ve reported you for child neglect. We’ll be taking the children. You might be charged for using the government’s family aid you’ve been getting to buy your drinks and drugs. I suppose they’d be lenient if you get a few more toffs’ houses to clean and begin to pay it back. That aid will now go to foster parents who properly care for the children in their care. In brief, you’ve been declared incapable of taking care of your daughter’s.”

Even the children who hadn’t been paying as much attention to the conversation as their older brother heard car doors slamming outside the building and began to huddle together.

“I believe they’ve just arrived.”

“We’ll help pack up the children’s belongings,” Karen said.

Later, as they headed out of that squalid London neighborhood, Karen said, “Think it’s heredity, Bee? Grandmother, daughter, Patty—they all basically abandoned those children.”

“I think Patty was more likely escaping the grandmother’s abuse. She might have been abused by the fathers, those daddy issues, you know, and mother as well. It’s the old ‘flight or fight’ choice for survival—if you know you’ll lose the fight, you take flight and live to fight another day.”

“Only Patty didn’t quite make it.”

“There’s that, but that wasn’t her fault. I’m surprised she could manage to relate to any adult.”

Chapter Eleven

Tuesday Evening: At Carlos's House

Bee parked her car next to Carlos's and entered the house. She spotted the big bloke before he realized she'd arrived. He was engrossed in reading a paper. *I'll have to tease him about letting his guard down. Maybe he thinks that home base is safe? Maybe in the London conurbation but not on an overseas battlefield.*

"That's not our local rag," she said to him.

"Very sneaky, *chiquita*, but I knew it was you. I can still appreciate your delicate perfume even at the end of the day." He waved the paper. "Picked it up from a park bench after taking down a naked man brandishing an old pistol, a relic. He thought he was the reincarnation of an eighteenth-century highwayman. In my business, we get all kinds."

"Sounds like a mental case," she said, sitting by him on the settee and stretching her legs. "Did he survive the encounter?"

"Yes, and most likely he's now full of drugs wearing a straitjacket and sitting in a padded cell, I dare say. He was sane enough to realize that the eighteenth-century vigilantes—that's what he called us—would have turned him into Swiss cheese if he hadn't put down that gun. Turned out it was fake, a prop thrown out that he found after a clean-up of a local community theater."

Bee smiled, poured him another glass of wine, and then poured herself one. "All's well that ends well," she said, touching her glass to his.

"Not for the man who was being honored for donating funds to fix up that park. I guess things continue to happen around parks for us. His photo's here in the paper; he doesn't look so happy."

Bee nodded. Two of her first three cases at her new nick had involved crime scenes at parks in the area. She wondered if that was only because her new patch had so many little parks to preserve open spaces. London's were scarcer because land there was so expensive.

Carlos tossed the first section of the broadsheet onto the table at his side, the lower section up. Bee's sharp eyes focused on the picture of the man speaking at a podium in a park.

She reached across, grabbed the paper, and tapped the picture. "You must have picked this up later?"

"Had to return to the crime scene, *mi amor*. SIO from your neighboring nick wanted to clarify some things with me. Old narcissistic bird squawking and flapping her wings, a female peahen pretending to be a peacock for the reporters who were there."

"Maybe her way of flirting? I think I know who you mean. Lillian's about to retire, so be nice. Is this a picture of the donor then?"

"Yes, some bloke named Daniel Caswell."

"Does he live in the area?"

"No idea, if I'm honest. Maybe farther upriver? The Lord Mayor said something about wishing all newcomers to the area could be so philanthropic. That wanker preened along with the mayor at that remark. Lots of peacocks around."

"I need to know more about him. The donor, that is."

That philanthropist Dan Caswell could be Dan Wright's twin, and, considering his three-piece suit with ascot tie and gold watch chain, he'd obviously moved beyond auto mechanic. *Maybe for the worse?*

First thing the following morning, Bee and Max went to visit the man Bee's team called Dan Wright. He invited them to take a seat in the two chairs in front of his desk and then sat himself behind it.

His *Caswell Estate Investments* didn't have a fancy office, but it was comfortably furnished. Besides the desk Wright was sitting at, there was another smaller one, presumably for a PA. In the far corner there were two wingchairs and a settee surrounding a low table. There were six filing cabinets standing attention against one wall.

"What can I do for you officers?"

"We have just a few questions for you, Mr. Caswell," Bee said. Max nodded without a smile. "How long have you lived in this area?"

"Longer than you have, Love, I'm guessing from your London accent—probably acquired by osmosis, and it has a bit of indeterminate toff in it, I dare say, as well as a bit of Cockney and Taff. I move around a bit, Darling. I have properties here and elsewhere, so I like to visit them from time to time. Estate agents run them, and one can't trust them completely, you know. It amuses me to study the local accents. I suppose you could say this area is where I spend most of my time now, but that wasn't always the case."

"What kind of properties, sir?" Max said.

"Some residential buildings; warehouses; commercial sites used for stores, pubs, and restaurants; and so forth. I'm always looking for a good property to buy or develop. I started small and expanded. It's just another way to make a living if one's careful about their investments. I'm stretched a bit thin right now because I partnered with some other blokes for a housing development a bit farther upriver. We believe that someday most of the Thames Valley will just be part of one huge London conurbation."

"I suppose the city of Oxford wouldn't like that very much," Max said.

He laughed. "Maybe not quite that far, at least in our lifetimes, but who knows? You can't stop progress, Sergeant Bloomfield."

"Do you have properties in Scotland?" Bee said. "Maybe Glasgow? I detect a bit of that local accent."

"Not yet. Their push for independence is always a concern, don't you think?"

Bee shoved towards him a few sheets she'd removed from what MacGregor had sent them. "Maybe with a different name? A 4-by-6 cell belonging to a Mr. Dan Wright?"

He frowned and poured through the sheets and then stared at them. "Everyone has a doppelganger, they say. I'll admit this fellow looks a bit like me, but I've never been to Glasgow. I'm from Newcastle originally, but that's near enough Edinburgh to put a bit of Scotch in my Cumbrian speech patterns, I suppose. My personal papers, driver's permit, and such, will prove all that I've stated."

"Have you heard of a band called 'The Ugly Ducklings'?" Max said.

"Can't say I have," Wright said. "Local, London, or international? And what do they have to do with anything?"

"Local, Mr. Wright, although they have toured on the continent," Bee said. "Our murder victim was a member of that band."

"It's Mr. Caswell, and I'm sorry to hear that. I do patronize some clubs in the area. Do you have a picture of her?" Bee handed him one. "No. Sorry, I don't recognize her. Looks a little young for me, Inspector, if that's what you're suggesting. I don't know her or the band."

The two detectives wasted another ten minutes or so talking to Dan Caswell, it all ending with both officers still convinced he was Dan Wright. They would check on his claimed

Northumberland background, but Bee knew that could be faked if a criminal was clever enough. And this Dan seemed to be quite clever, a cut above the usual street thug. Maybe he'd learned important lessons in Glasgow that served him well now? And developed important connections as well? *And how do I prove that and that he killed Patty?*

SAMPLE

Part Two

NCA's Interference

Chapter Twelve

Wednesday Afternoon: The Visitor from NCA

Bee's team had checked most of Dan Caswell's background by the afternoon when they received another visitor in the CID.

NCA Agent III Tod Bridges was a more mature version of a young MI5 agent who'd given Bee a lot of grief during a previous case. When the NCA was created in 2013, some police colleagues were recruited to fill its ranks. The handsome young man—at least he was younger than Bee—was probably an exception. He'd gone from college directly into the NCA.

He didn't have the rugged-handsome look like the actor who'd played James Bond in recent films but more a Celtic-handsome appearance like the actor who'd first played him. Looks could be deceiving, though, with the only indication of dissatisfaction with his superiors and his job being various gradations of a scowl. Some women might be attracted to him; Bee wasn't. But he didn't seem to care, which in the abstract was okay with her but in practice was a bit insulting.

Most conflicts police had with MI5 and NCA were at least partially due to the latter two agencies' different perspectives on crime when compared to local police's: Those UK-wide agencies were more focused on regional and even nationwide crime (MI6 took over from MI5 for international cases. Neither local police nor the agencies were very proactive, but the agencies' "big picture" focus often led to careful, long-term planning and investigations, so secretive that the public and media were rarely involved before the end game, if then. The latter suggested that the nickname "plods" applied better to their agents in Bee's mind and not ordinary police officers who often suffered from public pressure spurred on by critical media hacks.

After hearing some of NCA's intentions and informing Tod about what they'd learned from Glasgow, Bee said, "So now, Tod, would you please explain why we have to back off from investigating Dan Wright?" Bee could guess some of the answer, but she wanted Bridges to admit it. Would he?

"He's only one person among many who participate in a nationwide scheme to purchase abandoned or rundown properties and then overcharge people when they lease them by increasing prices every few months. Our task force is after all of them."

She smiled. Special task forces were common in the NCA as well as MI5. In that sense, her own team was a permanent local task force against crime. "And I suppose the lessees are too poor to complain about that until it's too late. I could see Wright aka Caswell doing that after talking to him. You say there are others he works with. That's atrocious, but is it illegal?"

"We have a group of lawyers on contract who are trying to answer that very question. Some areas have no laws to prevent that, while others do. In the latter case, there are a lot of variations on a theme as far as county laws go, but this group pushes the limits of those laws. In the former, they start out small but go large and then do a runner when authorities take notice or create new local ordinances. In all cases, their schemes contribute to overall poverty, lack of housing and workplaces for small businesses, and unfair displacement of people. Recent immigrants are especially affected because many aren't aware of their legal rights or the laws, specifically the local ones."

Most of that sounded reasonable to Bee, albeit a bit like a vicar's sermon. But why didn't 10 Downing Street just propose fair and uniform laws? "Nasty business, but irrelevant for us. Wright is our POI because we like him as a murder suspect. His business dealings, illegal or otherwise, are NCA's problem, not ours. We don't have the funding to help in your investigation that seems to go far beyond Dan Wright. To put a fine point on it, Patty Robertson was murdered, and Wright is now our most likely suspect. But I doubt she was murdered because of his corrupt business practices."

"I need more information than that. Convince me NCA should back off."

"I believe she turned down Wright's advances. He took revenge, stalked her, and then killed her. That's what we're trying to prove, and it seems to have nothing to do with his group's scheming."

He nodded. "We can't go round and round about this all day. But I still say your arresting him to solve your case could be prejudicial for ours."

"Even if I let you interrogate him when we arrest him?"

"That's the wrong question. You should ask me if you can interrogate him after we do the arresting."

She sighed. "Stalemate. Let's break it by making a race of it: Whoever gets the goods first on Wright wins the race."

"If you win, everyone participating in the scheme will too, if this Caswell and Wright are one and the same person, which might not be the case. Caswell's crowd will be forewarned at least and maybe fear that he will grass on them. NCA's chances will then go to zero."

"And if it's a tie?" Bee said with a smile.

"Unlikely, madam. We have a lot more to investigate than you folks do."

"And also a lot more personnel and means to do it with. Shall we see how our local media rats react to NCA's interference in local police work? They love attacking the national government a lot more than the local."

"You can't do that. We'll throw the book at you!"

"You're the ones bound by the Official Secrets Act, not us, at least not for a murder investigation. I'm sure that I'll have every plod from Aberdeen to Southampton and Liverpool to Newcastle would be backing us." The red in Tod's face was changing to purple. Bee decided to back off somewhat. Turning him into a stroke victim would be inconvenient. "Don't worry. While the media is super-important for a healthy democracy, they get in our way a lot too, mostly because they don't understand policing. I generally refrain from doing them any favors. Period. NCA doesn't either, I dare say, and maybe even less than we do, and certainly not MI5. But I'm not required to keep any of the national agencies happy. All I have to do is arrest a murderer for the local people here and my immediate bosses to say, 'Job well done.' A US politician once said, 'All politics is local.' What he really meant is that you should keep the local people happy first and then build on that. It all stems from human beings' tribal nature." She shoved some paperwork around; her desk was a tip. "Let's work together in a non-adversarial manner, Agent Bridges. Neither one of us is stupid. We should be able to find a way to do that."

"And here I thought Rodney was stubborn," Tod said with a smile.

"You knew him?"

"No, but I'm told he outmaneuvered us often enough in general and my boss in particular on a few cases when we were just getting organized back in 2013."

"I'm sure if you revisit those cases, you'll see that he found many loopholes in your evidence, faults you hadn't considered. And yes, he was stubborn. We had an interesting marriage."

"Shall we have a cuppa and then work on a plan?"

"A cuppa and some biscuits might provide some inspiration, yes. Fair warning: I want information to flow both ways." She smiled. "All too often, that's not the case, and you know that."

"If appropriate. I see no problem with that. My fair warning: They keep me in the dark at times too. Our lower ranks that include me have become the proverbial mushrooms."

"Same for the police, but not within this station. And there's nothing the two of us can do about that general problem. The good thing is that most of it is political shite that's not important to the people like us who do the work."

Most of Bee and Tod's plans came down to ways of not duplicating efforts. Bridgeton PD would continue to focus on the murder investigation, and NCA would continue to focus on Wright aka Caswell (Bee believed they were one and the same person, but they had little proof of that other than the uncanny likeness) and his friends involved in the property scams.

Bee soon found out which NCA cases Rodney had been involved in and had to smile upon reading how her bloke had destroyed the Crown prosecution's efforts. She had no idea if the criminals had escaped a deserved punishment, but the holes in the evidence had been gaping.

They were nearing a week out from Patty's murder, and Bee was becoming frustrated. They had nothing on Wright aka Caswell, not even a confirmation that they were one and the same person, and no other POIs that could turn into suspects. And the NCA agents weren't helping at all. *No surprise there*, she thought.

Their substitute DCI gave a press conference and made a fool of himself but tried to recover by blaming first the public for not helping and the CID for failing the public, including his DI. No names were given, but the reporters were smart enough to fill in the blanks. With just one event Roy Westwood had managed to irk a lot of people. Some of the band's fans even staged a protest in the station's car park. Bee couldn't blame them. *But if the Super had forced Roy into the press conference, what could he have done? Not blame his underlings, that's what!*

Gladys even called from the hospital to cheer everyone up, guessing that morale was so low. Bee felt guilty. *We're the ones who should be cheering her!*

When the clock said eight p.m., Bee knew it was time to go home.

Thursday morning, the bad news continued. Bee was at her desk when Max popped in. "Our two DCs shadowing Wright took a few pictures," he said after taking a seat in front of her desk. He placed a folder in front of her. "Our one and only POI hosted a little meeting at his place."

Bee studied the pictures. "Do we know who his friends are?"

"Not all of them, but we're working on it. The ones we've identified aren't from around here. All we know is that they are ex-convicts like Wright, if he truly is Dan Wright."

"I'd swear to it. Do you think Tod would be interested in these photos?"

"Maybe after we ID everyone. His lot might already know they're tight with Wright, but at least we can show we're collaborating with NCA by giving them the information. They might be interested in the car plates, how long the meeting lasted, and so forth as well."

“And he’s given us *nada* beyond more background on the band members. Suspicion of drugs usage and maybe trafficking them, a bit of smuggling when returning from their European tours—all just slaps on the wrists for rockers. But your point is valid. We’ll give them this information to show we’re team players.”

Karen opened the door at that moment and stuck her head in. “Bad news, mates. Our POI was observed partying in London the night Patty was killed. The witnesses are reliable.”

“The entire night?” Bee said after a groan. She realized that gave Wright an alibi.

“Just enjoying his Friday evening, it seems, to put it nicely. He had expensive-looking escorts on each arm as they went between clubs and pubs.”

“Source of the information?”

“Two NCA field agents shadowing Wright in central London. Hand-off from our blokes around here maybe?”

“Whatever. At least Tod hasn’t crowed about that or told us to forget about Wright.”

“Not yet,” Max said. “How accurately do we know Patty’s TOD?”

“Doc Gwen could only give us a longish-time span because that dirt bank and its surrounding air temperatures over the night could have differed from those reported. More likely the latter than the former, of course. But good point. Let’s compare his time in London with that time interval.”

Karen now entered the office. After a few moments of studying the times, they decided that it would have been difficult for Wright to return from London to murder Patty during the determined period.

“Could he have hired some lowlife assassin to do the job?” Karen said.

“Maybe,” Bee said. “But his reaction to Patty’s brush-offs were probably taken very personally. That would suggest he’d want the job for himself if he intended to harm her.”

“He fancied her, so revenge against her rejections would have been a personal vendetta,” Max said in agreement. “But now we might be back to square one without a POI.”

Bee sighed. “Send your information about Wright and his friends to Tod. We’ll downgrade our focus on Wright, but not completely. We obviously need to consider other possibilities. While I’m willing to bet Patty knew her killer well because she was very much a loner away from the band and the stage, we might have the case of some opportunistic killer she didn’t know who randomly chose her as his next victim.”

“That was always a possibility,” Karen said. “She knew the band members best, getting along with them well. Your other possibilities must have at least been someone who knew her but less well. Wright was an obvious POI in that sense because he hadn’t known her earlier and became infatuated with her. If Harry and the other band members’ perceptions are correct, your random killer now seems more likely.”

“And that might now lead us to a cold case,” Max said with a frown.

“Let’s not give up that easily,” Bee said. “Each one of us should go over everything we’ve learned again. Max, could you also ask some PCs or DCs to go back to those people in the residential towers who weren’t there on their first pass? People at work, early weekend day trips, whatever. Maybe someone saw the driver of that van clearly.”

“The TOD range implies most everyone we didn’t contact was asleep, but you’re right—workers on nightshift and people doing an early weekend dart might have seen something on the way out.”

“Even knowing for sure she was killed elsewhere and where that might be would be useful information. But let’s focus on what we already know. If Wright isn’t Patty’s murderer, it’s our duty to find out who is. We need to know who was driving that van if not Mr. Sampson.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Thirteen

Thursday Afternoon: At NCA's Regional HQ

"So, are you Mr. Wright or Mr. Caswell?" Bee said to the NCA's prisoner.

Their photos of the meeting had helped the NCA agents to obtain enough evidence to question Caswell aka Wright. As a thank you, Tod allowed Bee to travel to NCA's regional HQ to interrogate their POI to end all doubts about his involvement in Patty's murder.

The bloke looked exhausted. His head was cradled in his hands resting on the table when Bee entered. He looked up and gave her a smile, though. "I'm guessing you and your fellow plods did a favor for the NCA?"

"Just answer the question," said Tod, who was accompanying Bee. "We wouldn't want to charge you using an alias and not your real name, you know, if it comes to that."

"It's NCA's job to find out whether I'm Caswell or Wright, but I'll admit I knew Patty. I caught her rock group several times at *The Eagle's Nest* and became enchanted by her many charms and talents. Made a fool of myself, to be honest. But I didn't kill her. I'm many things, whether Caswell, Wright, or someone else, but I'm not a murderer. You can't fit me with that. I was in London that Friday night trying to relax a bit."

"Keeping on top of all your scams was stressful, was it?" Tod said, ignoring the alibi and focusing on his physical state. And the agent was still looking for information about Wright's friends, although, at least in Caswell's case, they were forewarned. They might not care if he went down, but they also might kill him to prevent him from grassing on them. Was Wright a major player in the group? Or even an equal one? TBD.

Bee glared at Tod for that distraction but then turned her attention to Dan again. "You'd better provide some more details about that London alibi. Were you alone?" She knew the answer, of course, but catching him in a lie could help her cause.

"I was accompanied the whole night by two escorts, Paula and Susie from *Good Times Escort Service*. FYI: That's a legit business. Check it out. If MPs or King Charlie's brother can use them, so can I. Those two women will vouch for me. A good evening was had by all. Helped me forget that slut Patty, they did. I now figure she was a lesbo, so good riddance. Gays, lesbos—they're all freaks I have no use for."

"Just because she didn't succumb to your advances, you conclude she's a lesbian?" Tod said. "Good thing you're not a detective, man."

"Dan, I think you knew nothing about who Patty really was," Bee said. "And you can't accept that she rejected your advances because you're truly a fat, ugly little loser." She didn't know if Tod was playing the good cop or bad one, but she'd decided to be acerbic in her interrogation—no coddling for the lowlife.

"Say what you like, but I didn't kill her!" His hand slapped the old table, making teacups jump. "Stitch me up for trying to make an honest living if you can, but don't accuse me of killing someone I didn't. You can't have evidence for that because there isn't any. Nothing!"

"What about the phone calls?"

"What phone calls?"

"Someone made obscene and threatening phone calls to Patty after she rejected you at the club."

Dan went into a rage. "Check my moby! Check the phones in my office! I know you rozzers can do that, especially with the help of this NCA bloke if I give you permission. And I do, because NCA's probably already done it." He pointed a fat finger at Tod. "And you lot

shouldn't think you can find anything you can use there. My friends and I communicated using a chat room on the Dark Web."

That sounded like a boast. *Is Dan telling NCA they're incompetent?* Bee suppressed a smile.

"Thank you for that information," Tod said.

Dan's red face had now taken on a mocking expression. "Good luck trying to find that chat room. And even if you do, you'll never break the encryption. We have some very devious and smart computer geeks working in our group." He showed the NCA agent both his pudgy middle fingers.

"Thank you for offering to speed up our tracing of your phone calls," Bee said, winking at Tod. She knew Dan wouldn't have offered that information if he'd made the calls. *So, who had?*

The little hope she'd had to fit Wright with Patty's murder was mostly gone now. *But will Patty's call records lead us to the real killer?* She was sure that NCA could get to the actual messages, but that would never be shared with Bridgeton police because it could cause a media scandal if it was ever revealed.

They would have to wait for the call records a bit too. Harry Wilson had given Karen Patty's mobile number, but Karen's request to the service provider hadn't yet arrived.

Back at the nick and as if the police muses had been listening at the NCA meeting, the three detectives studied the recently arrived call records finally obtained from Patty's service provider that Karen had started pursuing much earlier. Harry Wilson had provided Patty's mobile number.

"If we assume that Patty's caller made the most calls, this number is his," Bee said, pointing at one of Karen's lists. "Is it Dan Wright's?"

"I ignored that one, Bee," Karen said. "It's not a pay-as-you-go phone. It's Harry Wilson's private mobile."

"What? Could the band leader be our mysterious caller? Did those two discuss their gig prep that much? Or are those two just having phone sex?"

"Let me ask him," Max said. He left the room but soon returned. "Harry says he lost his own mobile three weeks ago." He pointed at another number on one of the lists. "That one corresponds to his new phone." There were fewer calls between it and Patty's number.

"Someone must have been using the old one," Karen said. "That's just as good as a pay-as-you-go to make those obscene calls."

"Better, if the caller wanted to implicate Harry," Bee said. "Didn't he cancel his old account?"

"Not yet," Max said, "but he said he will now."

"I wish we had recordings of those obscene calls," Bee said. She thought a moment. "Say, if the calls were made by someone using Harry's phone, won't we have location? At least triangulations from cell towers?"

Karen held up an index finger. "I'm on it. They asked me if I wanted that information if they had it. They just can't release call contents without a warrant."

"Go for it," said Bee. "I'm off to see Gladys. Let's meet early tomorrow morning. Say nine?"

The two sergeants nodded.

After she left, Karen said to Max, “Haven’t seen much of our substitute DCI. Do you think he’s washed his hands of this case now after that disastrous press briefing?”

“Oh, he’s probably watching to see if we make any mistakes. He’ll then blame the boss and make her life miserable like he did at the press briefing. Or maybe she verbally ripped his goolies off already for that. I’m betting that during her visit she’ll be consulting with Gladys. She doesn’t think Roy has any wisdom to offer, so she doesn’t want to waste her time on him.”

“Female officers still have to put up with a lot. The farther away from London we get, the worse it is, from what I’ve heard. But Roy proves the Yard is still bad too.”

“He’s old school. And from what I’ve heard, gays and lesbians get badgered even more. We’re all minorities in this business. Policing is evolving as the old bastards retire, though. We’ll be rid of Roy soon enough.”

Chapter Fourteen

Thursday Evening: At the Hospital

Bee and Carlos entered Gladys's hospital room and saw the empty bed.

"She's out for some tests," her roommate told them.

Bee glanced at the white board near the entrance to the room. "Mrs. Wilshire?" The woman nodded. "I'm Inspector Bee Berkeley. My friend here is Sergeant Carlos Lobo-Guerrero. We work for Gladys. Any idea when she'll return?"

"Soon, I expect. I must confess that I've not paid much attention to her problems. I'm sorry. I'm going into surgery. I'm very scared."

Bee approached her bed and patted the wrinklie's hand. "That's okay, ma'am. You'll be fine. Don't worry. The doctors here are very caring and competent." Bee had no experience with them beyond minor incidents—she did her check-ups and tests at an NHS health center—but she felt compelled to bolster the old lady's spirits.

Mrs. Wilshire sighed. "I might as well die. My old body is beyond the expiration date, I'm afraid. And I really don't want to go back to that awful nursing home, you see. The orderlies there injured me, you know. Tossed me around like a sack of potatoes. Oh, here are the people from the OR to take me to my torture room. Nice to meet you, Inspector. Gladys has talked a lot about you. Said you two agree on how things should be done. She admires you."

"Um, I admire her too."

"Come on, Debbie, me lady," one OR orderly said. "Off we go to see the Wizard of Oz."

Bee wondered if the OR orderly understood his own reference. That wizard was a shyster and scam artist. Hopefully Mrs. Wilshire's surgeon was competent. *And what's this about tossing the poor woman around in her nursing home?* Bee would have to investigate that.

The two orderlies carefully put the old woman on the transport gurney and wheeled her out. She waved at Bee and flashed a weak smile as she passed by them.

Bee then went to the ward's nurses' station. The head nurse there also told Bee that Gladys should be back soon.

And she arrived five minutes later.

"So good to see you, Bee," Gladys said. "Carlos too. I had an MRI this time. I've been scanned, pricked, and poked enough for a whole lifetime."

"You're looking good," Bee said. It was yet another comforting little lie—how can anyone look good in a hospital recuperating from a major traffic accident?—but she'd expected worse. She decided that Gladys needed a distraction. "I met your roommate, Mrs. Wilshire. What's her story?"

Bee expected a medical tale but received a more general one about the abuse of the elderly. "If half of what Mrs. Wilshire has told me about her suffering in that government nursing home is true, it should be closed and its staff should be in jail." That saved Bee having to mention what the old woman had mentioned to Bee and Carlos: Gladys would be all over it when she was better.

That still began a long discussion about abuse of the elderly in general, though. Gladys focused on QR codes or apps for transportation services, car parks, etc.; streaming video and internet services; access to medical records and self-help services—all dependent on owning a mobile when many elders often didn't have one and wouldn't know how to use it if they did. Bee concentrated on excess taxes, prices for drugs, and malnourishment. Of course, the abuse's

general cause was obvious: It came from an indifferent society that didn't care much about anyone over sixty.

"Elderly people have enough to contend with, and then we often abandon them, so they have to go it alone."

Bee smiled. "You must be feeling better. Save some vitriol for your substitute at the nick." She winked at Carlos who'd said very little.

"Who'd you get?"

"No one's told you? Maybe it will upset you if I do."

"Probably better that you tell her than someone else, *chiquita*," Carlos said.

"I probably don't even know the pillock. Not a female officer, I'm guessing."

"No. His name's Roy Westwood. I worked with him in London on a few cases."

"Oh my God! He's a misogynist prick!"

"So, you know him?"

"I should say so. He's my ex-brother-in-law!"

"Ex?" Carlos said.

"My sister came to her senses and divorced the lout. You know her, Bee. She's the one who runs that nice, assisted living place you got that old bloke into, the friend of the victim in that neo-Nazi case you just had. Now there was an extreme case of abusing the elderly!"

Gladys had helped Bee with that placement. "Um, too bad Mrs. Wilshire doesn't qualify to be there. She needs twenty-four-seven care if she's already in a nursing home."

"Especially after her hip surgery when she'll need rehab services. She'll probably be there for a while." Gladys grimaced. "Good luck with Roy. He'll drive you nuts, I fear. I must get well soon before he manages to ruin everything at the nick."

"Don't worry about that. I can handle him."

"I sure hope so."

The following morning, the three detectives got together again. Bee was late; nine a.m. had become ten-thirty. She'd made some calls from home to have someone visit Mrs. Wilshire's nursing home, deciding not to wait for Gladys to act. Bee suspected some foul play had caused the hip problems after hearing the wrinklie's complaints. Her good deeds had been slightly delayed by her being unfamiliar with elderly services in the area. She couldn't say she knew those in London very well either, but she knew more people there who did.

"Any more joy from the phone services yet?" Bee asked Karen. Bee was referring to the call locations.

"I have a map." She gave copies of it to Bee and Max.

She must have stayed late or come in early to produce that, Bee thought. Having a team whose members don't need micromanaging is a blessing!

"They originate from all over the place," Max said after studying the map.

"Fairly localized, though," Bee said. "And maybe the locations aren't all that accurate?"

"GPS and cell-tower triangulations might be mixed together if the GPS is turned off at times," Max said. "Or there's a first set of GPS data and then triangulations? The caller might have realized late in the game that the GPS was on and turned it off."

Bee nodded at him. "Could be. Our caller might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer. Let's concentrate on where most of those dots are clustered. Those are probably the GPS reports. What's there?"

Max smiled. "*The Eagle's Nest* could be the center."

“So, Harry’s lying to us?”

“Or the person using his old phone to make the calls is someone who’s often at the club,” Karen said. “I can’t believe Harry’s a murderer.”

Karen liked “The Ugly Ducklings” in general and its leader in particular, but Bee couldn’t imagine Harry Wilson being a murderer either. “More likely a staff member or frequent client who’s using Harry’s old phone,” she said. “Let’s go over the lists of employees and customers again.”

They had all the employees in their lists, but it was inevitable they were missing some customers. They’d already matched video records from the club to customers they’d interviewed, but people appeared on those video records who hadn’t been interviewed because no one knew who they were.

Max made a circle with his two hands. “Strangulation indicates that we can probably focus on males.”

“That would include many band members and clients,” Bee said. “What about Elston and Giordano? Should we look at them again? Rocky’s a big bloke.”

“Most males on the list are good size,” Karen said.

“Let’s get some of them in here again,” Bee said. “Even if we can eliminate them completely as suspects, that’s progress.” She raised an index finger as her office phone rang. She listened for a moment, then said, “I’m on my way.” She put the receiver down. “Something’s got Roy’s shorts in a knot. You two should set up the interviews. I must go have a chinwag with our lord and master.”

Bee knocked on the pane of Gladys’s office door and heard Roy’s surly invitation “Enter!” The acting DCI gestured towards a chair. “I’ve just spoken to the Super. He wants to know why you and your team are slow walking the investigation into Patty Robertson’s murder. The media hacks are all over him, and shite flows downhill in this business.”

“Hence I’m here. You haven’t exactly been on top of what’s going on, though. I can’t baby the Super. That’s on your plate. And FYI: Gladys used to handle the media, not the Super. He’s too busy playing golf with his VIP friends, including the Lord Mayor.”

“You’d better hope I’m not recording this conversation.”

“If you are, I’ll sue your arse. Do you want me to bring you up to date or not?”

“Please do. I get that Wright aka Caswell is out of the picture for the murder. Is that NCA’s doing or yours?”

“Both. We put our heads together. Mostly it comes down to his not being in two places at once. He’s still a POI for NCA’s larger investigation, far from being complete, I dare say, and we have him on the backburner for ours—it’s tight with the timeline but just possible—yet it’s more likely than not that some other bloke is the murderer. We’re regrouping. There’s phone evidence to be considered.”

“You have content?”

“The UK isn’t a fascist country yet,” Bee said. “All we can see is who called whom and then ask them why and maybe a disclosure of content. That takes time, Roy.”

“Should have been done already,” he said. “And seeing who called whom is just coincidence sometimes and therefore not trustworthy.”

“Coincidences?” Bee said angrily. “They can be more than that just by seeing the frequency of calls between two numbers. And cases are often solved by considering them. Detectives in pulp fiction often say they don’t believe in them.” Roy frowned at that. *Let him*

take that as a criticism! “But if a crime occurs on my patch, that in itself is a coincidence, and I have to solve it to explain it. One clue leads to another, valid or not, and those are all coincidences I must sort through. A case can grow cold fast when the coincidences stop occurring—forensic clues, criminals’ mistakes, random but relative comments from POIs and witnesses, and so forth, form the meat on the bones of an investigation. If we didn’t have coincidences, we couldn’t solve crimes.”

“Okay, okay, don’t break your leg getting off the speaker’s dais. When are you going to make some progress, Bee?”

“I’ve been hindered here in Bridgeton by not knowing all the local players. FYI: You sir have the same problem in spades. We might need some warrants sooner than later. If you’re so tight with the Super, make sure he understands that’s when he’ll have to stop playing golf with the Lord Mayor long enough to badger a judge when we need them. Got that?”

“So, Wright has been replaced by another POI?”

“I didn’t say that, but we’re not back to square one. Hell, at the beginning, we didn’t even know who the victim was!”

“Seems like you wasted a lot of time doing the NCA’s bidding and helping the victim’s siblings. Our media hounds are primarily local ones, spread from the London outskirts all the way to Oxford. They don’t much care about either the NCA or Child Services.”

“You were in Vice too long, Roy. What’s your definition of policing?” She held up a hand to prevent his feeble attempt at an answer. “No, I don’t care what you think. Mine is that we need to nick the bad guys who prey on innocents. That covers everything from what Tod Bridges and the NCA agents are doing to helping Patty Robertson’s siblings.”

“Good officers know they have to please their superiors.”

“In the best circumstances, what pleases them is what I just said. And that’s as it should be. Are we done?”

He sighed. “Keep me informed. The Super wants results. So do I.”

Bee didn’t even bother to respond.

Part Three

Nicking The Murderer

Chapter Fifteen

Friday Morning: At the Substation

Karen and Max had settled on the bouncer for their first interviewee in their second pass. There had been a few calls on Karen's lists coming from his personal mobile, but Bee agreed with her sergeants that he might know a lot about what was occurring at *The Eagle's Nest* related to the club's clients to the bandmembers and staff. It was worth spending more time with the gentle giant. Max joined Bee in the interrogation room while Karen continued to sort more candidates for interviews.

Rocky was nervous. *Maybe because he has old form?* Bee thought. *Let me try to put him at ease.* "Mr. Giordano, you're here only because you're a special employee at *The Eagle's Nest*. You're in a position to know a lot about what goes on there."

"I'm just there as hired muscle, ma'am, in a sense helping you plods when some customers get rowdy. I avoid physical violence if I can manage to send the belligerent wanker home with some well-chosen threats."

Bee smiled. "Belligerent wanker" was an interesting mix of educated speech and street talk! "But as a bouncer, you see everything that goes on, night after night, dinnertime to closing. That's why we've invited you back to talk to us. You also told us previously that you really liked Patty, so help us find her killer."

"She reminded me of my dead sister a bit—an older but equally nice lady."

"I'm sorry. How did you lose your sister?"

"Transit accident. A drunk driver smashed into her little Morris on her way home from work. Head-on collision, it was. Kathy had no chance of surviving it."

"I see. What happened to the tippler?"

"His brief tried to make it out like it was all Kathy's fault. Jury and judge didn't buy it, but he only got five years. Kind of makes you wonder, right?"

"Indeed. But back to Patty, if you don't mind. You have to be very observant when on duty at the club, right?" He nodded. "Ever since 'The Ugly Ducklings' began to appear there, was anyone ever acting towards Patty in an odd way?"

"You plods asked that earlier. My answer's the same: Only that one louse that ended up heckling her with the calls when we banned him from the club. Sure, everyone's eyes were on her during her solos and featured parts in the act, whether singing or playing, but I wouldn't call that odd. That only means she and the band were doing their gig well."

"You're talking about the club's audience. What about staff?"

"Some flirting around and ogling a bit directed at her from the blokes. Even Greg the owner chatted her up at times. I noticed that only because I didn't like his doing it, and she was uncomfortable with it too. Nothing compared to that heckler, though. Most of it was probably not much more than what you probably get here from male police officers, ma'am. Harry called it kidding around. Patty called it flirting. He was more like her big brother, though, and didn't like it much either. Tried to keep it under control, and I helped him do that. I guess it's what you'd expect in that kind of situation, though."

“You said she was uncomfortable with it,” Max said. “More uncomfortable with some punters than others?”

“In addition to her heckler, Greg, the boss, and Rex, the drummer, could go a bit overboard at times and get a little raunchy with their language, mostly when they drank too much. The alcohol is like gasoline on a fire when Rex is drumming—he goes wild at times—and Greg often doesn’t realize how much he’s tipsy because he sits and chats with guests a lot. People had fun there at the club back then when Patty was around. Now, not so much. Patty was an important member of that band.”

“I bet you control your intake,” Max said.

Rocky nodded. “Ever since Kathy’s accident, I mostly lay off the drink. She basically raised me, my old sis did. Now I’ve got no one. Greg and the rest of the staff are my family now. The band too, but I’m afraid they’ll soon be off to another gig somewhere else. Greg says they can’t bring in the punters like they used to do. The band members realize that. I’ve heard them talking about it. Unless they can find a musician and singer who’s a talented jack-of-all-trades like Patty, I think their days are numbered. What a shame!”

After Rocky left, the three detectives met in Bee’s office. She and Max gave Karen a summary of Rocky’s interview; she summarized her continued work with the lists.

“The club’s owner is giving me a hard time now, but indirectly,” Karen said. “One staff member said Elston called in sick; another said he’s stuck in Southampton where his car broke down; and a third said he’s in Spain on vacation. Bloke gets around, I guess. What did Rocky tell you?”

“We didn’t ask about Greg,” Max said. “And maybe Elston he the staff different stories to obfuscate?”

“Yes, they all can’t be true,” Bee said. “Why don’t you and Max visit the club and his flat? As the club’s owner, I wouldn’t like to neglect my business very long. Of course, he might just be enjoying some playtime in London like our Mr. Wright did. I can’t imagine either one saving a lot of money for a rainy day.”

She wondered where that expression came from. It rained in the British Isles more often than not, or worse—she remembered one hellish night in London in a snowstorm when she’d had a surveillance assignment. The London conurbation, which included the more rural Bridgeton and most of the rest of the near Thames Valley, got storms from various directions during the year. And when it wasn’t raining, there was often fog or other precip, if only what the river produced, its waters usually warmer than the surrounding air.

“Will do,” Karen said.

“I’ll commandeer a pool car,” Max said.

The two sergeants knew the team was at a critical point. They were stymied and needed a break in the case. If Wright aka Caswell wasn’t the killer, the possibilities were many between the band, other club staff, and customers. After interviewing Giordano, Max liked Greg Elston for the crime, but Patty’s assailant could be anyone, including someone random. There might be a lot of investigation still left, or the case might fizzle out and go cold. The latter occurred often enough.

Greg wasn’t at his flat, sick or otherwise. An old neighbor living in the same building told Karen and Max that she hadn’t seen him for two days. “He’s in and out at odd times, I dare say. He’s quiet about it, though, keeping himself to himself, so I might not register his comings and goings if I’m dozing or watching me telly. Not a bad neighbor to have, to be honest.”

The building wasn't all that impressive, and what they saw of the neighbor's flat told the two sergeants that its residents were mostly financially well off although still working class. Unfortunately, the old neighbor was the only resident of Greg's building who was home. The others worked. A chatty postman stuffing mailboxes in the lobby offered some help, though.

"He's bragged to me about his hideaway," the young bloke said. "He could be there. I got the impression that he took dates there sometimes. Um, I suppose I asked for that boast. I was saying that he'd become successful with his club and all, and that started his preening like a feckin' peacock. I wouldn't want his life, to be honest: late nights tending to boozy clients. I've got a steady job and girlfriend, so I'm good."

"Any idea where this hideaway is?" Max said.

"A cottage upriver somewhere, I think. I guess he's the type who, as soon as he gets a small dosh, must spend it on something. These units aren't that great so maybe what he has in the country is better? Some people are like that, you know, living in the present pretending to have modest means without planning for the future and using their riches wisely."

A philosophical postal worker, thought Karen. "Thanks for your information, sir. We'll try to find out where this cottage is located."

"I got the impression he bought it only a few years ago, if that helps."

"It does. Thank you." *It probably means Elston didn't inherit it.*

"Let me give Melody a call," Max said as the two officers got back in the car. "She knows her way around databases. There's probably a record of the sale."

"Assuming he used his real name."

"Are you thinking he took Patty there?"

"Probably not. She's a bit young for him. But we need to confirm that."

Harry Wilson knew Greg Elston, the owner of *The Eagle's Nest*, was Patty's fan, so he wasn't surprised when Greg asked, "Any word from the plods about finding Patty's murderer?"

Greg was a man whose few smiles were reserved for two occasions: A successful business deal—his club had been doing well even before the "Ducklings" arrived, and they'd made it even more successful—and any positive reaction from a female he'd chatted up, whether at the club or elsewhere. Patty hadn't reacted positively, but Harry knew that was more because of her past. Besides, she'd been a professional band member, saving her sexy body language for the stage, the distance between her and the fans creating a haven there that was sufficiently separated from that past.

A bit too much into good food and drink, Greg didn't present a handsome figure like Harry, Rex, or other male members of the band. Some women might be attracted to him for his money and would think that his looks were good enough, though. The tall bloke with wavy dark hair sprinkled with some gray strands appeared to be every bit the successful entrepreneur, perhaps an older stage actor who'd set up a small business empire to keep himself busy when roles had become scarce.

Harry shrugged after musing over how to answer the question, knowing that Greg was more interested in continuing their act's ability to draw in the punters. "They keep things close to their vests. The DI leading the investigation has a good reputation, though. I checked. She used to be in the Met. I'm sure she and her team will find who did it."

"Interesting. Tenacious like a pit bull then?"

"And a real stunner, considering her age. But don't get any ideas, old fellow. She's got one of those SCO19 blokes as a boyfriend—they often call them AROs now, trying to copy the

national agencies—and one of her sergeants even has a black belt. Either one could take Rocky in hand-to-hand combat, although it would be an interesting match.”

“Good to know. I’ll have to declare her off limits then.”

Elston liked to advertise his reputation of being a ladies’ man, even to other blokes and despite the looks they gave him. He’d often prowl the club floor, especially during breaks, chatting up the women. Many of them came in groups, so he would do some sampling, chatting up one while winking and smiling at others nearby. *Maybe he just thought that was good for business?*

Club owners often did strange things to bring the punters in. Harry even caught Greg eyeing Patty a few times but had put it out of mind because she was half his age, and he knew her past would lead to a brush off for Greg. *Had that wounded his ego?* Harry didn’t really care.

He knew she often worried about her siblings, so he believed she’d have been happy to see that Inspector Berkeley had stepped in to save them from their terrible home environment. *How sad it is that that promising and talented performer’s career has been cut short!* Harry would strangle the yob who’d done it if he ever met him.

His primary worry now was his band, though. Not only were they despondent because they’d lost Patty, but their performances were also suffering. Audiences’ numbers weren’t what they’d been either. Greg was first and foremost a businessman. Anytime now he’d cancel their contract—each one ran for only two weeks—and the band would have to look for another gig. But the word would be out: One of their star performers was gone. There might not be another gig!

After Greg left, Harry almost collided with Rocky. “You look like shite!” the big barrel of a man said. “I’ll buy you a pint, mate. Let’s talk.”

“Let me hit the loo first. I’ll then find you.”

After they sorted their drinks—Rocky’s merely half a lager and Harry’s a local ale—Rocky leaned forward. “Saw you talking with Greg. He’s acting really strange.”

“He’s probably thinking of firing us. Can’t really blame him, I suppose. We’re not the same group without Patty.”

“No, I haven’t heard anything like that. He grilled me about my interrogation by dem plods. I declined to compare mine with his, and he didn’t like that. I thought mine was none of his business, so I couldn’t resist.”

This bouncer has more than muscle, Harry thought. “The plods weren’t accusing you two of anything, I assume.”

“In my case, I thought ‘twas just them lookin’ for information. Maybe Greg’s habit of chatting up the birds here caught their attention. That detective should realize that Greg is all bark and no bite. If he walks out of here with bird in hand, she’s not too picky, and I’m sure that Inspector is damn choosy about who gets her arm.”

“She’s ex-Met, Rocky, so she’s no amateur. She’ll find Patty’s killer.” Harry had said that often enough lately that he no longer knew if he believed it.

“I sure hope so. I wouldn’t want the bastard to get away with it, whoever he might be.”

Chapter Sixteen

Friday Evening: At the Hideaway

The three officers got out of Karen's Rover and studied Greg Elston's country cottage. "Even the GPS got lost a bit," Max said. "Now, how do we get in?"

The postman's assumption that it would be a step above his flat had been incorrect. Maybe it had lots of land to go with it—land in the Thames Valley could be expensive—but the cottage itself looked a bit rundown. The land would have to make up for a lot to create a good investment. Had Elston investigated all that? Her impression of the man included the belief that he didn't work too hard to earn his success, and the club, flat, and cottage represented a strange mix of investments. Was that the investment diversification that some financial planners had recommended?

Bee thought the place had some charm that might compensate for its isolation. It would have more charm with some upgrades. It was a bit far from the home nick for her taste and not easily accessible by any main roads—the motorway to Oxford was many pot-holed lanes with twists and turns away—but a lot of people would consider it a nice little rural getaway from the the Big Smoke.

"We can't even peer in through a window," Karen said. "All the blinds are down."

"Probably common in a place that's not used all that often," Bee said. "Let's take a walk-around."

The ubiquitous English front garden was overgrown but had some promise if anyone ever bothered to tend to it. Some of the paint was peeling, more at the rear than the sides and front. The back had a porch where one could sit and enjoy the soothing lea that ended in some woods.

The whole place made Bee think of Dan Wright aka Dan Caswell and his property investments. *Had Greg Elston bought his cheap as well and planned to rent it out to Londoners looking for a natural setting for their weekend getaways?* That wouldn't be criminal, but if the place was where Patty had died, she'd nick the damn bastard!

Max tried the rear door. People often forgot to lock them, but this one had only the standard door lock in contrast to the front door that had that plus a deadbolt.

"There might be an alarm too," Karen said, echoing Bee's thought.

"I hope not," Bee said. "I don't want to have to get a warrant and come back here with Elston. He could hide a lot of evidence in the time it takes to do that. Besides, that would waste more of our time if we're barking up the wrong tree." She studied her two sergeants and saw their guilty looks. *Subtle, but that's one reason why I'm a detective. I can read body language better than a book.* "Did you scheme to bring me here to participate in some dodgy policing practices?"

"Wouldn't think of it, ma'am," Max said. He looked under the mat in front of the door and held up a key. "And look what I found! No dodginess beyond going inside needed. Shall we do a quick search? We can say we have probable cause because we heard strange noises."

Bee smiled. "You two are itching to get in. Okay, let's do it quickly. You two take upstairs, I'll take down. Try not to leave any evidence we were here. We don't want to give Roy any ammunition. He'll surely be looking for it if only to get at me."

Karen laughed. They entered the cottage. Bee watched them head upstairs. *Nothing we find can be used in court, but we need information. I don't want Patty's murder to become a cold case!*

"All clean upstairs," Karen said when the two returned. "One bedroom in use, but tidy; the other is used as storage. We didn't want to take the time to go through the boxes in it. Some looked like they contained paperwork from the club."

"Boring," Max said to support her argument. "We'd need to give all that to an accountant."

"Nothing much down here either," Bee said. "But the kitchen has been used recently. Let's return to the backyard. Be sure and latch that door, Max, and put the damn key back."

They walked around the backyard a bit more, and Max called them over to an old brick barbecue pit. He pointed to what was in it. "I'm guessing those are leather sandal straps and that's what's left of a necklace."

"A locket," Karen said, after putting on the rubber gloves and studying it.

"We never found Patty's clothes," Bee said. "Maybe they ended up here in these ashes?"

She also put on rubber gloves and stirred the ashes, plopping the straps complete with their little buckles into the proffered evidence bag Max held open. She then asked for the locket, pried it open, and they saw it contained a picture of Patty with all four of her siblings, a miniature version of the one they'd seen at the grandmother's house.

They all had triumphant smiles, so no one was surprised at Bee's question: "Shall we call Mr. Elston in again for interrogation to see if he can explain this?" She closed the locket and plopped it into another evidence bag.

Before either sergeant could answer, Bee's mobile rang.

"Where are you?"

Bee decided to put Roy on speaker, if only to have witnesses to her bollocking.

"Sir, I'm SIO of a murder case, remember?"

"NCA's been hounding the Super and me. They're asking for more help from your team. Our AROs as well. They're anxious to get more evidence so they can move in on Dan Wright's crowd."

"Mostly white-collar crime, Roy. They don't need firepower from the AROs."

"You can tell them that. Get back here and take care of it. We made a deal with NCA, remember? We'll lose face if we don't honor it."

"That deal hasn't benefitted us much. I'm halfway to Oxford. They can wait."

"You want me to say that to the Super?"

"I don't give a damn what you say, Roy. I say we need time to get back, and I'll not make haste on the motorway for the NCA. And we need some travel time to think. We have a break in our murder case, damn it!"

"Forget that little slut. She flirted with one too many blokes, I'd bet. I'm dealing with the VIPs of law enforcement here. They come first in my book."

"Not for me, and I say your book is wrong. By the way, why don't you volunteer to help in NCA's raid if you're so willing to please. We'll back you up when we're able."

She cut his spluttering off and put the mobile back in her purse. "What a wanker!" Karen and Max were smiling. "Don't look too gleeful. You tricked me into coming here without a warrant. Fortunately, the critical evidence was outside Greg's hideaway. We'll just ignore our little search inside. And now you're my accomplices in giving the finger to Roy and the NCA. Turnabout's fair play!"

Their smiles turned to frowns. She waved the plastic bags. "You two can take this evidence to Phil Martin while I talk to Tod Bridges. I want to cut Roy and the Super out of the NCA action. They'd drive us nuts otherwise, and we'll have enough to handle with Tod and his

agents' superiority complexes. But Roy is right. We do have to play nice with Tod and friends, if only for future cases where we might need information from them...or backup against Roy."

Bee couldn't get hold of Tod Bridges, so she went home. Phil and his team would do their jobs at the cottage. Karen and Max could sort everything else and arrange to have Greg Elston brought into the nick the next day.

"You're in a good mood," Carlos said to her when she came through the door. "Seems like my team will be doing some work for Agent Bridges. Will you be involved in those ops?"

"Maybe. but I'd prefer not to or even think about them. Just don't get shot, Love. You're good to come home to." She plopped down beside him. "We got lucky. I think we have Patty's murderer."

"Can you say who it is?"

"The club owner. Allegedly, as they say. I suppose it's possible he'll weasel out of it, but we have some good evidence against him. You don't know him."

"I've never been to *The Eagle's Nest*. Wish I had when Patty was in the band. So, Mr. Wright, or whatever his name is, is just another POI for Bridges now?"

"Among many others." She leaned against him. "Shall I order something?"

"We have leftovers." She made a face. "Okay. What appeals to my *chiquita* tonight?"

"A good shag, and I need energy for it. I'm heading for the shower. Surprise me with something that has high-energy content. We have a lot of ethnic food places around here, and more keep making their way out from London to offer us their wonderful cuisine."

"Um, take a long shower then. Here's me off to do some detective work for a change."

Bee had to stop drying to find her bathrobe and her pocketed mobile; it was Max calling.

"Am I interrupting anything, Bee?"

"A later call might have. What's new?"

"Phil didn't find anything else in the ashes or traces in the cottage. Our evidence against Greg seems a bit limited now."

"But it's solid, right?" It was Karen's voice. Bee had been put on speaker phone.

"I'm going to have to get him to confess with what evidence we have available. Good work, you two. Go home and get some rest."

"You as well. We're all drained."

"Oh, I have dinner and an exercise program planned. You young people can't have all the fun. Have a good night." *Let them wonder what I meant by all that.*

Chapter Seventeen

Saturday Morning: Another Interrogation

Greg Elston had enough money to hire his own solicitor; he accompanied Greg into the interrogation room. Bee made a good show of turning on the videorecorder, ignoring the solicitor, and cautioning the club owner.

"Mr. Elston, we're not going to charge you with anything just yet. We're still looking for information. Today though, it's a bit more specific questioning." She shuffled some papers, knowing it would make both Greg and his brief nervous. They would be wondering what specific information she was looking for. "Let me start by asking why you didn't tell us about your country property, that nice little country cottage on the way to Oxford?"

"Did I have to list everything I own? I also inherited my parents' dump down south. I'm sitting on both for a while to see if they accrue more value."

"But you use the cottage and not your parents' house. We checked both."

That made him nervous, but he quickly came up with a story. "I go to the cottage occasionally so the thieves will think it's occupied. It's not very secure, as you could tell."

"So, you have things of value there?"

"They'd steal the kitchen sink if they thought they could make some money off it."

"Okay, I'll give you that. So, did you always go there alone?"

He fidgeted. "Sometimes I'd be with a date. If you were open-minded about the place, even you might have found it romantic."

She smiled. That was a veiled insult. "I'll give you that too. And I know the place well enough. With a bit of repairs, it could be rather nice."

"When I can afford them."

"Tell me, did you ever take Patty Robertson there?"

He blanched but recovered. "Of course not. I never had a date with Patty. She was very young. Too young for me, if I'm honest."

She held up the two bags of evidence they'd harvested from his hideaway's barbecue pit, waved them at Greg and his brief, and then placed them on the table. "One bag contains sandal straps. One thing about sandals you both should know: Women often wear them without socks. Skin cells can be embedded in them. One of the straps has Patty's. Now this other evidence bag is more interesting. As you see, it contains a metal locket. It's not expensive, but it protected the little picture inside, a photo of Patty and her siblings." She paused a moment to enjoy the duo's squirming. "How do you explain that we recovered these items from the barbecue pit in the backyard of your little cottage, Mr. Elston?"

"I need to confer with my client," the solicitor said.

"Fine. We'll take a fifteen-minute break. When I return, I expect some logical answers. If not, then we will be charging you, Mr. Elston, with Patty Robertson's murder."

"My client has a confession to make," Greg's brief said when the officers returned to the interrogation room.

"I didn't mean to kill Patty," Greg said. "We were just going to have a little fun at my cottage."

"She agreed to that?"

"I was giving her a ride to rehearsal, but we were early. She seemed nervous, so I thought we'd get a few drinks, relax, and see what might occur. I know she fancied me."

Arrogant bastard, Bee thought. “Did it ever occur to you that she was nervous about being alone in a car with you, an older man she’d seen chatting up women in his club? She was a young woman who had trust issues with adults, males in particular. The four most important ones in her life—two fathers, mother, and grandmother—had failed her. Her siblings too, but she probably suffered more as the oldest who might have turned on her old father and stepfather. Do you ever think of women as persons, Mr. Elston?”

“I resent that. I hired her band, didn’t I? The little bitch went crazy, jumped out of the car, took a few rolls in the lane, and then darted off. I caught up to her when she collapsed. She was groggy, so I continued to the cottage with her. She was all sweaty and pale, so I put a wet washcloth on her head and wondered if I should call for an ambulance. A bit later, she just groaned, grabbed her head, and rolled off the settee. She did it to herself, I say. I’m not a murderer!”

“Sounds like an accident and nearly a suicide to me,” the brief said. Bee glared at him. Bee glared at him. “Fortunately, you’re not the judge and jury.” She turned her scowl on Elston. “You’re saying she willingly got into the car with you?”

“It’s a bit of a trek. She was probably walking to the nearest bus stop. What do I know? She seemed okay with it at first.”

“People don’t jump out of cars just for fun. What did you say to her?”

“The usual: How I loved her in the band; how the punters loved her.”

“And how you could make her happy with your tender, loving care?”

“I often say things like that to women. Sometimes it works; other times not.” He smiled, but it faded under Bee’s glare.

“And this was after the incidents she suffered with Wright?”

“I agreed with the others about her going to the police.”

“Especially after the obscene phone calls?”

He paused to think. “No. I can’t say I knew about them.”

“Oh, you must have. You made them.”

“How dare you!” He’d stood and was shaking a fist at Bee.

She smiled. “You found Harry’s old mobile and used that. I’m sure we’ll find it somewhere in your club. All the calls were made from there.”

“That requires a warrant,” the brief said.

Bee handed a copy to them. “Our SOCOs are there now. Just another item of evidence against you, Mr. Elston. In the old days, you’d hang. Lord knows what the CPS will plan for you now. Sit down, Greg, or we’ll put you in cuffs and leg irons.” He sat like a popped balloon trying for a landing. “And now I need a break.”

Bee went to her office and called Dr. Gwen. After repeating what Greg had confessed, she said, “Most of that’s consistent with my findings, Bee. I’m sorry. A jury probably wouldn’t convict him of murder. His brief would put me on the stand and force me to give the same answer. The CPS might not even send the case to the Crown Court.”

“I can still charge him with kidnapping and obstruction of justice, right?”

“I’d think so, but I’m no legal expert. Maybe you could try to add manslaughter? Hit him with everything except murder and see what the CPS says. He deserves time, but don’t quote me.”

Bee frowned. A good barrister, not the solicitor now accompanying Greg, might get the lout off with only community service. But Gwen was right. Bee had to throw everything she could at the club owner and see what stuck.

After ending the call with Gwen, Bee went and found her sergeants. “Remember that handyman who rented the van?” They nodded. “Let’s see if Greg knew him. I’m not saying he was Greg’s accomplice, but I want to strengthen my warning to him to behave himself. If he wasn’t directly involved, okay, but I don’t want to see him again. And he might just provide some more dirt on Greg Elston.”

“Understood,” Max said.

With that, Bee left Karen and Max with all the boring work of closing the case. *Take that, Roy Westwood!* They would remand Greg and start the paperwork for CPS.

She now needed to talk to Tod Bridges, no matter how much she disliked him or NCA.

Part Four

Equestrian Symbolism

Chapter Eighteen

Saturday Afternoon: NCA Beckons

“An old bloke at my nick whom, like Harry Potter’s nemesis, I shall not name, says you need my team’s help,” Bee said on the phone to NCA agent Tod Bridges. “What’s up in the domain of the super-cops?”

“We’re now in crunch time trying to organize a countrywide sting, and we need help locating where all the suspects are and arresting them. Brass has decided we must do it as much as possible in a coordinated fashion so that arresting some of them doesn’t warn the others.”

“They don’t want much, do they? And you watch too many old American crime shows. Bees like me can sting, but we do raids or ops in Britain, remember? I’ve got the idea, though, and you’ve got a problem. Most police officers aren’t vetted enough to meet the security reqs for MI5 or NCA; we don’t have the proper clearances for the simple reason that the Met can’t handle all the vetting that would be required, not to mention that you can be a good copper while still being a slight security risk in the eyes of the Home Office. And some officers without vetting who don’t like NCA might feel unconstrained enough as a result to leak news about your plans.”

“Um, I never thought of all that. Thanks. I’ll pass it up the chain of command. It’s obvious we’ll have to create a one-time clearance for this special op.”

A little late for that! Bee now felt sorry for the agent. At the very least, he would be the harbinger of bad news. She came up with a solution.

“One sheet of paper for each person to sign will do the job nicely. Those who don’t want to sign it won’t get to play. By the time the Met checks everyone’s form, we should be done, of course, but it will keep the NCA and Home Office VIPs happy with at least part of the paperwork already in progress. I’m just trying to protect your skin, Tod.”

“Thank you. How did you even think of it?”

“I’ve had a permanent clearance ever since Rodney represented a Chinese spy. Haven’t needed it since then; don’t want it, to be honest; but I still have it.”

“I hope Rodney didn’t win.”

“He didn’t. My evidence was airtight. I got it without having a clearance, though, so I and a few others couldn’t have testified at the trial if we hadn’t been cleared.”

He laughed. “In other words, you couldn’t be privy to your own evidence otherwise. What an interesting dilemma. But we’re not as picky as MI5. Those spooks aren’t really cops; we are.”

“Ah, but NCA should be just as picky as MI5 because of what I explained. I need to protect my team, and you should want to protect yours as well.”

“Got it. And you want to nick Dan Wright aka Caswell as much as we do, among many other suspects in our case.”

“Either NCA or us. For the moment, he’s the one who got away from us, and I’m not happy about that. Just between you and me, I know he’s guilty of something. King Charlie’s boarding houses aren’t that good at reforming criminals. Never were; never will be.”

That conversation soon led to an invitation to a meeting at the local area's NCA office for Bee, Karen, and Max. Bee drove, and this time she parked in the underground garage to hide their participation in an op she didn't even want to support.

On the way there, her two sergeants cleared up a festering question Bee had about Patty Robertson's case. "SOCOs found an invoice where Greg Elson paid for work done by Claus Sampson. He admitted lending Greg the van. Said he had no idea that Greg was going to use it to haul a body."

"Do you believe him?"

"We do," Karen said.

"Forensics evidence would be unreliable anyway in Claus's case because he was the lessee of the van," Max said. "His spoor would be all over it. I even gave Greg the chance to name Claus as an accomplice. He didn't, and his story matched Claus's, so Greg was the driver of that van dumping Patty's body."

"How noble of Greg to avoid trying to fit Claus with the whole crime. Probably couldn't see any real benefit for his case to do so. But for now, let's forget about that case. It's in the CPS's hands now."

They approached the guard station by the elevators. A man in an ill-fitting uniform popped out.

"Third floor, ma'am," the agent pretending to be a valet told her after checking their credentials. Karen and Max had temporary clearances, but Bee showed her old one, a beat-up piece of yellowed paper with some brown coffee stains that gave her the idea for a color scheme in Carlos Lobo-Guerrero's den aka family room aka third bedroom aka home theater. "Been to meetings here a few other times, haven't you, ma'am?"

"More visits to NCA in London than to here. I don't want to make a habit of it again here, though."

He smiled. "And I don't like checking IDs either, but must needs. We all must make sacrifices for the country's security, you know."

"You can work with our accountants to figure out how to pay for our time then," she said with a smile. "I came in at street level before. Does this lift go up to the third floor too?"

"The two from the main lobby and this one, ma'am. You folks are special guests, I'm told."

"Oh, we feel so special, mate," Max said with a smile. "I'd rather be getting a cavity filled, to be honest."

Bee gave him a scolding frown, a warning to behave, and they headed for the elevator. On the third floor, a stern woman with thick glasses showed them to an empty conference room. "The lads are still debating tactics."

"Without our input, of course," Bee said. "Any chance we might get some coffee or tea while we wait?"

She frowned. "I'll see about it. Most of us just use the canteen."

"But that area is more classified," Bee said. "Tod told me that when I was here before."

"And he's right. You three probably don't have the proper clearances to drink our tea or coffee." She smiled to minimize the obvious put-down.

"And maybe they've jailed Juan Valdes for illegal entry into the country," Max said to Karen with a wink.

“Oh, I’m sure that MI5 would have done that chore, not us,” the woman said now with a straight face.

Bee smiled. The bookish woman who could be any VIP’s efficient PA, not just an NCA agent’s, might be okay. “Never mind. We’ll take our coffee break with the others when they decide to grace us with their presence. I’m sure you have better things to do.”

She sighed. “Yes, if joining their meeting is considered a better waste of time. I apologize. We’re running a bit late. Have a seat. They’ll be here soon.”

A smaller man than Tod led the NCA agents into the room and then took over the meeting. After everyone sorted their seats—there was just the right number of chairs, including one for the librarian lookalike who’d greeted them—the imperious little twit glanced around the table, his eyes coming to rest on Bee.

“Let me welcome our guests,” he said. “I’m Leroy MacIntosh, the NCA agent who has the dubious honor of being in charge of this local office. Do I know you, ma’am?”

“The Crown versus Henry Chu, 2005.”

He smiled. “Of course. How is Rodney these days?”

“We’ll talk about it later. For the others attending from NCA, I’m sure you already know that I’m DI Bee Berkeley. My colleagues are DS Karen Strong and DS Max Bloomfield from my same CID. We’re from Bridgeton. I suppose we represent all the local police officers who have the dubious honor of helping you folks organize your raid on Dan Wright and his friends’ illegal properties.”

“Correction: Except for details regarding personnel, it’s already organized,” Leroy said. “Nationwide. Your job is to help us integrate the local police into our effort when necessary. And because you three had Mr. Caswell in your sights for another crime, you’ve been chosen to bring up to speed about twenty more of your companions from around the area at a later meeting. Can you handle that, Inspector?”

“We’ve done larger raids in the past. I might be the wrong person to perform that duty, though. Unfortunately, the right one, DCI Gladys Harkness, is in the hospital. She provided valuable input on the officers who have been cleared to participate, though. They’re all competent. That includes three ARUs that local stations around here share; most of their members are ex-military, of course.”

“Let’s hope the raid doesn’t evolve into several firefights where we’ll need them,” another NCA agent at the table said.

“You have to be prepared for anything,” Bee said. “Perhaps your people should introduce themselves, Leroy.” She wasn’t about to succumb to guest-speak and call him Mr. MacIntosh even though he might have cheered Rodney on in that case. He certainly hadn’t keep apprised of Rodney’s career.

“Of course. I apologize. My error.” He went around the table with his agents nodding at the three police officers as their names were spoken. When finished, Leroy said, “Most agents here are experts on fraud, Inspector, but we’ll also have two NCA AROs in play as well. Perhaps one of ours and one of yours can come up with plans A, B, C, and so forth, in case the raid leads to a few skirmishes.”

“Have your own planning efforts considered the criminal backgrounds of those we’re after?” Max said. “A violent past might imply violence in a future raid. Bad habits die hard.”

“We intend to share that information. Most of those we want to arrest have form for some sort of scam, but some also have a violent history. Those details and the corresponding personnel

are less important than ensuring the timing. We can't move on them until we're sure that everything will happen more or less at the same time. Even with that, a few are bound to escape our net." Leroy's toothy smile seemed as false as an old movie villain's. "We're only part of a countrywide operation that will include action even in Glasgow and Edinburgh," he said.

"Who's running the whole show?" Karen said.

"We're not privy to that information. The Home Office has kept it a secret, but I suspect it's a small group blessed by them. Information goes up the ladder, but little comes down except for mods to plans. That's for security purposes, of course."

And useful to anyone covering their privileged arse if there's a complete cockup, Bee thought. At least we can't be blamed for that!

Chapter Nineteen

Saturday Evening: The Calm before the Storm

Upon returning home to have supper with Carlos, a rare occasion but always a welcome one, Bee discovered that his was one of the AROs charged with creating contingency plans for the raid if violent altercations occurred.

“Those plans had better minimize your danger,” Bee said.

“We’ll do what needs to be done, *mi amor*. How was your meeting?”

“About as exciting as watching King Charlie’s second coronation in Scotland. Too much bureaucratic blather and twaddle for my taste. Why don’t you order a takeaway dinner while I take a quick shower?”

Bee was toweling herself off in their bedroom when the aroma of good food wafted her way. She wrapped the towel around her waist, cursed her damp, unruly hair, and continued into the dining room.

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this NCA raid,” Bee told him during their takeaway meal of vindaloo, naan, and rice accompanied by an excellent Cabernet from a new vineyard in southern England, that wine now made possible by global warming. “Our bloke said the whole country’s organized, but I’ve only seen one local list of targeted scrotes and another of who’s going after them, your AROs being recent additions. How everyone is used efficiently and effectively is yet to be determined.”

“I only know about the local ARU situation, and that describes it. We might be heading for a huge cockup, *chiquita*, because Mr. Wright and friends might just be better prepared than NCA. They’re all experienced crooks, after all.”

“And now possibly smart businessmen cleverly doing many illegal things, having learned dearly from their previous mistakes but still addicted to the game and now knowing better how to work around the rules.”

“Like some politicians and their lawyers. And one leak could kill our raid.”

“Not our problem, *mi amor*. We’re just tiny cogs on that big NCA gearwheel.” At that moment, her mobile rang. She spotted it on the hutch parked against the far wall and stared in its direction.

“Are you going to answer that?” Carlos said.

“Reluctantly.” She got up, the towel slipped off, and Carlos gave a whistle. “Suffer in silence, *hombro*.”

When she picked up the phone, she heard Roy Westwood’s voice. “Hello Bee. There’s been a change in plans.”

Not much in the way of greetings, no “Am I interrupting anything on your Saturday evening?”—just his weaselly voice grating on her nerves as usual.

“Are you referring to NCA’s op?”

“Yes indeed. And tone it down. I regret to inform you that the Super thinks a more experienced police officer should be handling our participation. I’ll be taking your place.”

She was about to debate that claim of experience—Roy probably wanted some glory going into retirement and convinced his friend the Super to make the change—but hadn’t Carlos just said they might be heading into a huge cockup? *That change might get Roy out of their substation even faster if it occurred! Even fired!*

She wondered if she should warn him. While feeling a bit bad about her scheme, she rationalized the whole thing: Roy would probably depend on Karen and Max if knowledge about

their patch was required, and those two had been policing in the area longer than Bee had. Roy might be okay if he was smart enough to depend on them. *If not, let him go down in flames!*

"Is MacIntosh okay with this?"

"The Super convinced him. I have a lot of London experience and enough in Bridgeton now, so I can be responsible for a lot of the capital's conurbation. That better matches the other police participations."

I bet! All grifters wanting some of the glory! "Good luck then."

She had mixed emotions: She didn't want Karen or Max to get tainted by an NCA fiasco, but she sure would love Roy to get just a little egg on his face, and indirectly the Super. But she also wished she could consult with Gladys. That, of course, wouldn't be appropriate, but Gladys would tell her if she were way out of line.

The next morning, Carlos left early to attend the first meeting of all the AROs involved in the NCA's raid. "You be careful, big man," she said, giving him a goodbye kiss.

He held her off a bit by the shoulders and admired her naked body. "I'll keep this lovely body in mind all the time, *chiquita*. You know I'd much rather stay here and do a lie-in with you."

"One with lots of exercise, you mean. I might go out for a run to burn off some of the calories I was planning to use on you."

"Ooh, that's torture, *mujer*. Enjoy your day."

She watched him drive off, smiled, and sighed. She'd tossed her vibrator when she'd moved in with Carlos. Yes, a run might do the trick of using up her pent-up energy, but it certainly wouldn't be nearly as much fun!

A five-mile jog with a long dash at the end followed by a shower only reminded her of the lonely times just after Rodney had passed. She became desperate enough to peruse the books found on Carlos's e-reader—hers were still stashed away in boxes in his basement, waiting for her to sort them—and picked a title that looked like fun, *A Time Traveler's Guide through the Multiverse*. Obviously sci-fi, but after reading the summary, she decided it was a sci-fi rom-com. She hadn't liked *The Time Traveler's Wife*—hadn't even finished it, in fact—but Carlos's choice looked like it might be a lot of fun.

She was soon into it and enjoying the author's style. He alternated between the heroine and hero's points of view, and the chemistry between the two seemed to mimic hers and Carlos's because the backgrounds of the protagonists also were so different. She'd just started the fifth chapter when her mobile rang. *Now who dares call on Sunday morning? Has Roy already realized he's not up to the job?*

"Oscar Williams here." She recognized the name and voice as belonging to a detective constable on her team, a bright lad half her age. "With the sergeants absent, I decided to bother you, ma'am. Sorry."

She sighed. "It must be important. Lay it on me, Constable."

"We have a body of a woman found at Riverside Park, Inspector."

I am a jinx! Another damn murder! And yet another park! "Okay. Get a pathologist and whatever SOCOs you can find to help, and I'll meet you there."

"I'm already here trying to organize the uniformed. Almost ready to sing that Kris Kristofferson song." She didn't know who Kris was. Obviously, some singer. Oscar explained. "Retro. He wrote 'Me and Bobby McGee,' although Janice Joplin popularized it. I'm referring to

“Sunday Mornin’ Comin’ Down,” also his song but popularized by Johnny Cash. I prefer Kris’s own versions naturally.”

“Naturally.” Bee could almost imagine the lyrics of the second song matching her mood. *You’re a strange young bloke, Oscar Williams, who lives in another era.* “Keep on top of the crime scene. Call in some of your other companions. God knows who you’ll find on Sunday morn’. Everyone’s probably on a lie-in after that last case if not off playing with NCA. I suppose I’m the stand-in for the DCI now. SIO has just taken on a new meaning. We’ll cope. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

With the blues and twos—her car was now discreetly equipped—she made it there in ten.

Dr. Gwen was dressed in overalls and just pitching her tent with the help of some local PCs whose uniforms looked dirty and wrinkled; and Phil was there with another SOCO, both in blue jeans and sweatshirts. The lanky Oscar took large strides to meet her at the curb when she parked there at park’s edge.

Oscar had the build of a long-distance runner: a short torso and long legs defined his general physique. His large hands and slender fingers made Bee think of a concert pianist, though, not an athlete. He had a fair complexion, cinnamon-colored hair, and high cheekbones with sunken cheeks, the latter making him look a bit emaciated. She always felt the need to feed him, to bulk him up a bit.

“They’re trying to figure out how to get her down.”

The others were clustered around a life-size equestrian statue at the edge of the park nearest the river that Bee, not knowing the area that well, took for some historical heroine. *Maybe Joan of Arc?* She then realized that the horse was a steel or stone sculpture but its rider, the body of a naked woman, was for real. The only problem: The horse looked more alive than the woman. Bee could just make out the tethers that anchored the human body atop the horse.

“What the hell? We must have a nutter! Who in his right mind would do such a thing?”

Oscar clearly didn’t want to play psychiatrist as he said, “Phil thinks he has a telescoping ladder buried in his van somewhere to use to get her down. He and Dr. Gwen are having a fit, though. The crime scene on and around the statue will inevitably be compromised.”

“Um, I’m going to upset Gwen even more. Phil and his friends get first dibs. They’ll have to collect as much forensics evidence as they can before they pull her down for the doctor. Go tell them that while I find my Wellies.”

Of course, there’d been some rain Saturday night—not uncommon in London or in any of its suburbs—and the fog was now rolling in from the Thames just to make the whole scene even more eerie. Thinking of how her relaxing and lazy Sunday morning had been interrupted, Bee detested the interruption in general. The worst of it all was that Oscar had things in control, so she’d soon be home without much to do again. The investigation couldn’t really begin until Monday, and it just wouldn’t be the same with Karen and Max absent.

So, I’ll be bored if I stay around here and bored if I go home, she thought. If she stayed, she would spend most of her time watching the fog thicken. *Or would it be thinning? In any case, boring!* If she went home, she’d at least be reading a sci-fi rom-com. *But without Carlos? Boring!*

She put on her Wellies and approached Gwen who was in waiting mode as well after Bee’s orders. “Not exactly a monument to Lady Godiva. The steed is black. The lady is all pale.”

“Makes a statement, though,” the pathologist said. “I thought you were going to be off in some hush-hush op with those NCA blokes.”

The station's gossipers were efficient. NCA's raid was supposed to be a secret. Gwen's knowledge about it didn't bode well for the success of the mission. *As long as Carlos is safe, I don't care!* "Roy usurped my duties."

"I then hope all the glory he expects turns to mud on his face," Gwen said. "What's your take on our crime scene here, Bee?"

"The murderer is making some kind of statement about this woman and horses, but that's about as far as I'll guess right now."

"The rigor's helping the pose, so she was placed there early this morning. You can see the hair's wet, so she was in the rain. Determining TOD better than that might be difficult. Phil won't be able to find much evidence either because of the dampness. I guess it's up to me. I'm guessing twenty- to thirty-years-old. She was a real stunner. A bit too plump for a runway model, but quite pretty nevertheless."

They both watched two pandas pull up on the other side of the park. Two pairs of uniformed constables jumped out.

"I'd better go talk with the new arrivals," Bee said. "Where's Oscar?"

After Bee and the DC gave the PCs a short briefing and arranged for cordoning off the area and beating back the media hacks who were bound to appear—a reporter and his photographer were already present—she said to Oscar, "You're the acting detective sergeant now. When you get things sorted here to your satisfaction, return to the station. We'll set up a murder board." She waved her mobile. "I took several pics, so I'm going to try to find out who our victim is."

"Here we go again!"

"Indeed."

Chapter Twenty

Late Sunday Afternoon: Understaffed

Bee looked at the eager faces of the remaining detectives and uniformed of her team that Roy had decimated. Of course, she'd known he'd conscripted Karen and Max, but he'd also "volunteered" two DCs and several PSs who'd integrated into the original team as productive officers. *And God help us if we need some AROs!*

She pointed to the pics on the murder board. "Meet Denise McBride, the youngest child of Martin McBride, the Lord Mayor's Treasurer aka Bridgeton Township's Chief Financial Officer. Oscar and I will be paying the family a visit this evening to give them the sad news. Denise was well known as an equestrian and had even been on several UK teams that competed internationally before she enrolled in an Oxford graduate program, where she's supposed to be at this moment, I'm guessing."

"Was she kidnapped there?" said one of the remaining PSs.

"We'll have to determine that. I was lucky to ID her, to be honest. Not being from the area, I don't know all the political VIPs."

"Lucky you," Oscar said, getting a laugh.

"Um, this will be one hell of a way to get to know Mr. McBride, telling him his daughter's been murdered. I suppose the equestrian reference at the murder scene is clear, although why anyone would kill someone for horse riding is beyond me."

"How 'bout a jealous competitor?" said the same PS.

"Murder seems a bit extreme for that," Oscar said.

"But we'll consider it," Bee said. "It could also be the case of someone wanting more time spent on him than she spent on horse riding." She knew that some of the male officers would turn that into a bawdy statement, damn them! No respect for the dead sometimes. "Let's forget about motive for the moment. Let's divide the work up the best we can now, considering we're understaffed. Given that and the fact that the park is in a commercial zone that's mostly empty on a weekend, especially Sundays, we'll forego the usual house-to-house for now, or business-to-business as it would have to be for this case. That still leaves a lot of ground to cover, people."

With the staff she had, she did the best she could doling out assignments.

Oscar indicated a lapse, though. "If she's supposed to be at Oxford, someone should check out the situation there."

"Thanks. Of course. I forgot that. Those who can, get started. We'll visit the parents this evening with the awful news, and tomorrow I'll head out to Oxford. Hopefully I can get back here by lunchtime. Fair warning: Don't take advantage of the fact that I can't be looking over your shoulders on this one for lack of personnel. Call me if you find out something important or need an official approval for something—Roy's not here to give it, so it's on me or the Super—but otherwise just keep plodding along without me. And I suppose I must pretend I'm Roy reincarnated as St. Nick and say that you can keep track of overtime but don't inflate it." That caused a few smiles.

"Double overtime for today?" said the same PS.

"I have no idea. Just note the day and the hours. Someone will take care of it."

The McBride mansion could be considered a symbol of old wealth. It was probably more charming in the evening under artificial lighting than during the day's harsh sunlight that

spotlighted the blemishes of time. Possibly once the “country home” of some VIP in the Victorian era, it was a stately house sporting the mishmash of architecture that such toffs of that age had preferred. It had a few outbuildings, but the lot was too small for other typical Victorian features common in estates two centuries ago. Its first owners might simply have been lower-level functionaries in the service of more powerful people.

While certifiably Victorian-ugly on the outside, even with nighttime floodlights diminishing the stains of time, the mansion might be comfortable inside. Back then even owners of modest means would have needed room for servants even if most came to work from the small surrounding towns and villages. For the 21st century, though, Bee wouldn’t want to pay the utility bills. Its taxes and upkeep would be expensive too. In other words, its owners now would have to be well-to-do, perhaps more so than the original ones. That told Bee that McBride made far more money in personal business deals than what he might make as the town’s treasurer, although chances for the first would come his way because of the second. That was the norm for most politicians.

Mrs. McBride opened the door, saw their warrant cards, and said, “You’d better talk to Martin if it’s official business.”

What else could it be? Bee thought. “Please just ask him to join us. I need to talk to both of you.”

“Go through to the parlor,” she said. “I’ll go get him.”

By the time they finished shaking hands, sorting chairs, and Bee and Oscar passed on tea and coffee, Bee had found time to organize in her mind how she’d approach the old couple. After studying the man a bit to estimate his possible reaction, Bee said, “We’re here about your daughter, Denise.”

He was dressed informally: expensive polo shirt, pleated slacks, and leather loafers. He seemed to be a bloke who never got enough exercise: pale skin, sagging jowls, and double chin were perhaps signs of age as well as too many fancy dinners. His smile seemed forced. Bee didn’t find him attractive, and thought he was fortunate to not have to win any elections because he wasn’t photogenic. The Lord Mayor had appointed him.

“I’m sorry, Inspector,” said Martin. “She’s at the university this weekend. I can give you her number if you like. But why do you want to see her? Is she involved in something she shouldn’t be?”

“A good question. Perhaps one of you can tell me. I’m sorry to bring you bad news. Your daughter Denise is dead. We found her this morning at that riverside park that has a life-sized statue of a horse. She was murdered, Mr. and Mrs. McBride, and posed atop the steed.”

The wife went pale; the husband looked away to hide his own expression. Bee waited, hoping at least one parent could recover enough to continue.

Martin was the one who made the first move. He went to the liquor cabinet to look for liquid courage, pouring a brandy for his wife and whiskey for himself. After handing her drink to her, he tossed down his whole half-glass and sat the empty on the small table in front of him. He then closed his eyes. “I need to know the circumstances,” Martin finally said. “We’ll offer a reward, of course.”

Of course. These people like to solve their problems with money.

“How will that help?” said his wife, tears streaming down her cheeks as she looked angrily at him.

“It will help me cope,” Martin said a bit chagrined. *Good for you, ma’am!* “And I’ll know who he is once you catch him, Inspector, which will be especially useful if there’s a cockup and you or the CPS must let him go free. I can choose alternative routes in that case.”

Bee ignored what he was implying. “I repeat: whoever did it left her mounted on that statue of a stallion you might remember from the park. We’re still in the process of pathological exams and gathering other forensic evidence. Eventually one of you will have to come to the morgue to complete the ID process. I know this is an awful moment for both of you. Would you like to have a family liaison officer stay with you for a while?”

“No! We want no one’s pity.” McBride pointed a long, scrawny finger at Bee. “Just find the bastard who did it!”

“To that end, perhaps you can help us, sir,” Bee said, refusing to match his threatening tone. “Did Denise have any sworn enemies? Beaus she’d rejected, equestrian competitors who hated her, and so forth?”

“She was an intense competitor in school and at equestrian events. I can’t imagine that leading to murder, Inspector. Life’s all about competition, isn’t it?”

“What about someone going after you, sir, by attacking her?” Oscar said, speaking for the first time.

Martin glared at Oscar. “Political payback? We’re talking local politics here! Families aren’t targets, just our fellow politicians, and not physically. I dare say that most of our esteemed City Council members don’t know any of the others’ family members. They might have met them at social events but soon forget them. The political attacks are always direct and verbal—certainly not violent or directed at family members. I’d guess even Commons functions in exactly that same way. If I’m a Conservative, I might hate some Labour bloke’s politics, for example, but I wouldn’t ever attack his family. I wouldn’t even know them!”

“At the local level,” Bee said, “business interests are involved. You’re not a full time Exchequer for the Lord Mayor, for example. Do you have any business competitors who’d strike out at your family members?”

“Compete, yes; strike out at, no. England isn’t some backward Third World Country, Inspector. Words now matter more than swords! Political power is wielded by networking.”

“Back to Denise,” Bee said. “We’d like to interview some of her friends. Could you provide a list?”

“We only know the ones before she went to college,” Mrs. McBride said. “Her horizons expanded after that. One of her most recently acquired ones was Juan Rivera.” Martin nodded. “He’s a Spaniard she met at a show.”

“A romantic interest?” Bee said.

Martin laughed. “Hardly. Gayer than the Rocket Man, but he only sings to his horses. Weird as hell, Denise said, but he became a good friend because of their common equestrian interests.” He thought a moment. “I suppose we could come up with a list of friends she’s mentioned to us. I’m sure she’s met plenty more at Oxford.”

“I understand she’s there for graduate studies,” Bee said. “Did she also go there as an undergraduate?”

“No, she went to Durham,” Martin said. “She loves the east coast. We’ve had a boat docked in Newcastle for years and a small cottage there for almost as long. I encouraged her to go to Oxford for the politics. She wants—wanted to be the next Margaret Thatcher, crazy girl.”

No chance of that now, Bee thought. “Yes, we would appreciate those lists. Or anything else you can think of that might help our investigation. Thank you for your time, Mr. and Mrs.

McBride. And again, we're terribly sorry for your loss. We'll do our best to bring Denise's murderer to justice." *No guarantees. There are never can be any guarantees.*

SAMPLE

Chapter Twenty-One

Monday Morning: A Trip to Oxford

Unlike Max, Bee hadn't gone to school at Oxford. She'd been there a few times representing the Met, but never for Bridgeton PD. It was a pleasant drive farther upriver, which meant west, either via M40/A40 if you were in a hurry, taking a bit more than an hour, or through pleasant towns and villages if you weren't. Compared to London, Bee could split the difference because she was partially there by starting out in Bridgeton.

Oxford wasn't a sleepy college town, though. It was a good-sized old historical western European city much larger than Bridgeton, and the university was intertwined in its long history. Its many colleges were a challenge for new students learning their way around as well as for visitors, but Max had told Bee where to get information, an old building that housed some of the general administrative offices. He was otherwise occupied, of course, but she wouldn't have given him the task to visit the university in any case—the Oxford graduate would carry with him too many biases created by his stay there, good ones as well as bad.

Bee had first talked to her sergeants on speakerphone, though, getting their take on NCA's plans in general and Roy's in particular and their nick's participation in them. To their credit, they offered no opinions about either one. They presented all the information just like good journalists: Just the truth about what was occurring, some of it troubling to Bee who knew that coordinating a nationwide raid was no small endeavor.

It seemed like Tod Bridges had put Roy in tight reins, though, to prevent him from causing any serious damage to the planned NCA raid. That limited Karen and Max's participation as well, of course. Bee put the whole NCA op out of mind and concentrated on her new case.

At that old building on the Oxford campus, she met a pale woman with short hair and thick-lensed glasses that made her eyes look too large, and whose appearance could have been helped a lot by using a bit of makeup. She was the PA for some assistant to an Assistant Dean of something or other who invited Bee into her office. It was about the size of a closet containing Elaine Petty's desk and two chairs that looked like leftovers from some ex-student's used dining table.

"I understand you're inquiring about one of our students, Denise McBride. Am I allowed to know what the inquiry is about?"

Very formal. Let's rock her boat a bit. "Denise was a murder victim. I'm the SIO for the case."

The woman turned much paler. "How awful! I don't know Denise personally—" She seemed to suck on a lemon. "Didn't know, rather. But others who did will be even more upset, I'm sure." Elaine raised an index finger, left the office by squeezing by Bee, and returned with a folder. It became the only folder on her desk, and she opened it. After perusing the file, she nodded, and said, "She's only an average student so far, but that could have changed as she got sorted. Graduate studies are more demanding than undergraduate. I would guess her grades suffered because she spent a lot of time on extracurricular activities."

You make it sound like Oxford graduate students are like pampered public-school pupils, lady. Max had insisted that Oxford wasn't Eton. No coddling. "Sports?"

"You're referring to her equestrian activities, I suppose, but she was also in a debate club and a member of the *Liberals of Tomorrow* club."

Interesting, Bee thought. *The Lord Mayor's administration is Tory. Presumably Papa McBride is a Tory as well.* "I'd like to talk to some of her tutors if she had reading courses."

"Of course. All in political science and government. We even have Americans who take those courses. You've probably heard of the Rhodes scholars from the US, Mr. Booker and Mr. Buttigieg."

"Can't say I have, but I'm mostly apolitical because of my profession. Wouldn't they have taken advanced courses?"

"Indeed," Elaine said with a smile. "If they were serious about spending their time here wisely. You never know with Americans. Denise was just starting her graduate career, so her courses were hard but not overly specialized." She perused a few more sheets in the file.

"Thomas Hart was her tutor in English Political History. He was probably the most senior tutor at this point in her studies. Would you like to talk to him?"

"I can start with him if he's available."

Hart was on campus, Elaine set up an interview, and Bee headed across campus to find the tutor.

Thomas Hart lived in the same building where he received the students he tutored. He was a young, swarthy fellow with twinkling eyes, bushy eyebrows, and trim beard that probably made him look older than he was. *Maybe that's the idea? A tutor shouldn't look younger than his students.*

After introductions, he said with a laugh, "When I saw you coming across the quad, I thought, 'Here comes another US politician.' We're rather famous for receiving them, although I often wonder what they can learn in the UK that they can't in the US. Maybe the development of an appropriate Yankee inferiority complex?"

Bee ignored the editorializing. "Yes, I suppose I don't look much like a normal student, but I doubt I look like a US politician."

"Aye, you look like what my lecherous old man would have called a mature stunner, a woman he might try to pursue because she must surely know how to please a man. He's quite a cad. Was, I should say, although he could certainly catch you now in his motorized wheelchair if he spotted you in his nursing home."

"Is that meant to be a compliment?"

"Take it as you will. He was a parasite of society, an ex-MP from Newcastle, so not as bad as the royal family. I try to stay as far away from him as I possibly can."

"You're estranged, I assume?"

"That's a nice word for it." He looked at his watch. "I must tutor someone in forty minutes, assuming the lazy wanker's on time, so to business, ma'am. I can't imagine how I can help you—I haven't received my gigolo license yet—but what would you like to discuss otherwise?"

"Certainly not your ego. I'm here for Denise McBride."

"She missed a session last evening. I intend to call her. Thanks for reminding me. What about Denise?"

"She's dead. Murdered." She hadn't softened the blow to see its effect.

Thomas hands started shaking. Bee waited for him to calm down. "My God! You don't think I did it, do you?"

Not guilty, but the self-interest is notable. "No. I just want to know a bit more about Denise, and you probably saw her as often as anyone."

“Once per week if she’s not off riding some sleek nag, claiming credit for what the horse mostly does all by himself, to be honest. Many times, she’s not well prepared for our sessions. She doesn’t take English Political History too seriously. Many people would say that’s the correct way to approach it. Those responsible for that history certainly didn’t take it seriously, but they created it, with blood, sweat, and tears.”

“And do you take it seriously?”

“Obviously. This little island was always a damn over-achiever, to be honest. It dominated the world for centuries, and even before that there’s a lot of its political history to study. I haven’t decided what to focus on yet in my own research mostly because there are so many interesting possibilities. Two thousand years of possibilities and more. Americans have it easy in comparison—just a bit more than two hundred years, unless they consider English influence on the American colonies, which they so often ignore, often at their peril. The US Senate and House are unfortunately modeled after our Parliament, for example, even to the extent that the US Senate is as useless as our House of Lords. It was designed to be a debating club for American aristocrats as well—or pretend ones.”

The interview dragged on with Hart’s opinionated mini sermons continuing to annoy Bee because they weren’t unbiased academic observations. The tutor was helpful in providing a list of Denise’s other tutors and friends, though, with the definition of “friend” being mostly dominated by a few tutors and full professors: According to the tutor, many had the opinion that Denise had managed to ruin three marriages!

“By her own admission, not gossip,” Hart said. “I confirmed divorces were in progress in those cases, but not that she necessarily caused them. She might have wanted to be labeled as a ‘bad girl’ as far as I know.”

“Did she go after you?”

He smiled. “No, but I’m not married, so I wouldn’t be a challenge, would I? I’m just a tutor and then a friend to have the occasional pint with, and when we first met, it was all about academic issues. And no, I’m not gay. She just wasn’t my type, nor I hers. I’m also not weak like those professors who succumbed to her advances. They were flattered by a young bird’s attentions. I’m not that stupid.”

“Were her advances enough to make a wife or two commit murder?”

He mused over that a moment. “I doubt it. They are noble but suffering women who supported hubby’s academic pursuits only to be tossed aside when hubby was well established. They probably were just happy to get rid of the wankers and get on with their lives, having wasted far too much of them on academic flotsam and jetsam.”

Before she tried to interview some people on the list of Denise’s other tutors and friends, Bee decided to visit downtown Oxford for an early lunch.

Bee found a small student hangout not far from Tom Gate, overlooked by the famous Tom Tower with its famous bell at the entrance to Christ Church. She paused only a few minutes to stare up at the tower designed by Christopher Wren and opened in 1682.

The café, though, was a modern one. There was plenty of seating available at that early hour. She chose a bacon and cucumber sandwich from the menu and accompanied it with a cup of excellent coffee.

She had just finished the sandwich and was still working on the coffee when she spotted a familiar face passing by. She threw a ten on the table and left to follow Dan Wright, wondering what he was doing in Oxford. *Does he have properties here?* She couldn’t remember.

She soon lost him, so she called Karen. “An FYI: I just saw Dan Wright here in Oxford.”
“Is he following you?”

That question surprised Bee. *Why would Karen ask that?* “No, not that I know. Does he own any properties in Oxford?”

“Mostly in the outskirts. It’s weird that your paths crossed. I’ll mention it to Max. I’m not quite sure who in our task force is now tailing Wright aka Caswell.”

“If someone is, they’re doing a good job of it, or not one at all. I haven’t detected anyone, and Wright was strutting down the lane like he owns the world. I’ll give you the street he was on and the one he turned up. The rest is up to you because he lost me.”

“If he lost you, he might have lost them, whether copper or NCA agent. That will irk Tod, but I’m going to have to tell him.”

“Do that. I’m heading back to campus, looking for more info about Denise McBride.”

“Good luck.”

The first person on Hart’s list was Sheila Hanlon, supposedly Denise’s best friend, according to Thomas. Bee had called her while waiting to be served her lunch, and they’d agreed to meet at the psychology lab where Sheila oversaw some animal experiments involving chimps. The young woman received Bee in her little office. Via its rear window one could see the cages filled with the cute apes; Bee thought they didn’t look so happy about their situation, though, and said so.

“We keep them only for three years, and then they go to a reservation near Portsmouth to enjoy a safe and happy retirement. We’re studying how human beings learn using the chimps.”

“What if they resist learning like some humans do?”

Sheila laughed. “The chimps behave better than many young students, I dare say. They’re more curious and enjoy the challenges we give them. For many, it’s playtime.”

It was difficult for Bee to imagine Sheila and Denise as close friends. The short, frumpy Sheila with her barrel-shaped body was nearly an opposite of the exquisitely proportioned Denise, not an anorexic-looking runway model but a woman who’d look good on any bloke’s arm. Sheila would need a lot more than fancy clothes to look good at Windsor Castle; Denise would have looked good in any gown purchased off the rack. Bee wondered how their outlooks on life had clashed as adults even if they were close friends.

Of course, if they’d known each other from nursery school days forward, their bonds would depend on neither looks nor personalities. They’d be more like fraternal twins who shared all of life’s experiences and were bound by them. In different ways, of course, but soulmates, nonetheless. Sheila would definitely feel the loss of Denise.

“To business then. Did you know a lot about Denise’s activities outside Oxford?”

“We’d been in school together for donkey’s years, Inspector. From nursery on.” Bee nodded; she’d already known that. “I told her many times lately not to lead men on, but she usually took a handsome bloke as a challenge, especially if he was married.”

“So, you think that’s what caused her murder: Too much teasing? I’m told she ruined a few marriages.”

“She liked to get a bloke aroused and wind him around her little finger. I often thought she considered men to be fools. She included her father in that group, by the way.”

“So, she’d seduce the bloke, ruin his marriage, and then ditch him?”

Sheila smiled. “That’s only partially correct. He’d be charmed out of his mind and then ruin his own marriage; she would never tell him that he should leave his wife to be with her. At least that’s what she told me, and I had no reason to disbelieve her. I don’t think she pursued

blokes to achieve better academic standing either. Most of the professors and tutors she seduced weren't hers, just men she'd meet at social functions. That debating society and club were real hot places for hookups, or so she said."

Bee thought a moment. "Were they all docents—professors or tutors? No students or other men?"

"Any handsome man, rich or poor, was fair game, Inspector. She tended to prefer married blokes with money—she received a strictly controlled and modest monthly allowance from her old man—but the feller could be of modest means as long as he spent a lot on her."

"Was she looking for a sugar daddy? A fellow who'd spoil her?"

"No, I don't think so. Money wasn't a major concern either. I'm not sure she was looking for a husband or permanent lover at all, to be honest. She was just playing around to have fun. She always said there was plenty of time to find a husband. I guess I agree with that. I'm in no hurry either. Today's women should be smart and get professionally established first. A woman nowadays is stupid to depend on a man too much. If our bloke has a midlife crisis after a few years of marriage, we must be financially independent so we can send him on his way without affecting our lives too much. I've seen a lot of women in their late thirties or early forties forced to take menial jobs just because they have no professional skills and depended too much on their blokes who then abandon them for a younger woman."

In a way, Bee thought that was a practical attitude. Abusers loved to make their women dependent on them, for example. It was a terribly pessimistic view of marriage, though.

"Is there any bloke who got really angry with Denise's cavalier attitude towards men when applied to him?"

Sheila thought a moment. "One comes to mind. He treated her well and told her off when they split. He wasn't married. He seemed quite enchanted by her originally. She often called him her 'little prince' because he wasn't that tall. In fact, he was a bit overweight too. Seemed to have a lot of money, though, and he always took her to nice places. I think he was a developer who worked with Councilman McBride in the construction of new residential towers. He put up most of the money—he bragged that he had properties all over the UK—and here locally Martin helped him get all the plans through the morass of bureaucracy to the building permit stage. That's the way it always is, isn't it? It's whom you know who helps you become successful."

Bee perked up. "Are we talking about something illegal?"

"Not at all. This bloke and Martin just formed the perfect team. They have advantages that other businesspeople don't have."

"I see. And Mr. McBride knew about the relationship?"

"Probably not. He wouldn't have approved. That bloke is probably fifteen years older than Denise. She saw him for a while, though, until she lost interest and broke it off."

"When did that occur?"

Sheila thought some more. "Not long ago. Maybe three weeks, or four."

"So, this man wasn't connected to the university. Did he have an interest in horses?"

"Horse races, more like it. He seemed to follow all the famous ones, even those in the US. Martin's a fan too. That's how they met—at the track."

"Do you know this older beau's name?"

"Let me think." Her brow wrinkled and her nose twitched. "Got it. Cardell. Daniel Cardell...or something like that."

"Might it be Caswell?"

“That’s it. Daniel Caswell. Not a bad fellow, to be honest, but too old for her and not really her type...although I’m not all that certain what her type was. Do you know Caswell?”

“I think so. Thanks for your time, Sheila. You’ve been a great help.” Bee handed the young woman one of her cards. “If you think of anything else that might help our investigation, please call me or the station.”

“Will do. I wouldn’t bet on Caswell as your main suspect, though. That plump little fellow seemed to be a real gentleman. I haven’t seen him since Denise dumped him.”

“Just another person to talk to,” Bee said, not wanting to give anything away, “as we look more into Denise’s life.”

“He was mostly out of it, although he and Martin were still tight, but maybe he could provide more information.” She winked at Bee. “Pillow talk, you know.”

Bee was already ahead of Sheila, though. With Dan Wright returning as a POI, she’d forget about the others on Hart’s list who didn’t seem to be such close friends. Bee would revisit Martin McBride, perhaps at his office, because he might know an easy way to find Dan Wright aka Caswell. The ex-prisoner turned businessman had cleverly teamed up with a council member to easily get his deals past the gantlet of estate bureaucracy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Monday Afternoon: At the Town Offices

It was maybe a bad time to look for Martin McBride because the Council had just finished a session. He received Bee, but she could tell he was tired and ready to go home. *So am I!* She decided that if he didn't complain, she wouldn't either.

At home, Martin had dressed informally. There at the municipal building, he could have been on his way to London's West Side to see a theater production and a late dinner. He was in a three-piece suit, tie, and an abundance of men's jewelry, including a pearl tiepin with matching cufflinks as well as a gold watch chain hanging across his abdomen made more prominent by the vest. The highly polished shoes looked Italian. Facial stubble added a disheveled look to counter all that, though. *Carlos sometimes shaves twice in a day*, she thought. Dark-haired men often had a late-afternoon shadow, even Martin, who didn't have much hair on top of his head.

She'd chatted with Oscar on the phone while waiting for Martin. Neither the PM nor forensics had provided any useful information for the case, although the former had shown that Denise McBride had succumbed to a heroin overdose. The assumption was that it wasn't self-administered: It would have been difficult to tether herself to the statue otherwise; or position herself atop the stone horse once she was tethered, in which case there would be a syringe lying about. They'd never found her clothes, so that implied there was someone else present. *Had her killer taken them as a trophy? Or burned them like in their previous case?* It didn't matter much, but not having them reduced the possibilities for obtaining useful forensic evidence.

"I assume you have new information for me," Martin said once Bee sat down in front of his desk.

"More questions, sir. About your business relationship with Daniel Caswell?"

Martin laughed. "That wanker! He's just another example of a builder who curries favor with someone on the Council—me, in this case—to move his projects along. Rather his group's, because many of the projects weren't uniquely his. There's nothing illegal about that. And what does it have to do with Denise's murder?"

"I'm guessing you didn't know that Denise and Dan were in a relationship?"

"What? That little imp? No wonder you think that something illegal was going on. I had no idea. We just hit it off at the racetrack one day and later worked together on some projects. Council members want to see progress in Bridgeton. Tear down the old; build up the new. Not a bad policy when the old might mean ugliness from Victorian times or earlier. That's one place projects get delayed, by the way: Members from the historical society get their hackles up and want to preserve some old worthless building that should have been condemned a century ago. In any case, I received no money from Dan for greasing the bureaucratic wheels." He sighed. "Okay, maybe a few lunches now and then."

I bet, Bee thought. "And I'm more interested in their relationship, Mr. McBride, not your facilitating for the moment. Although we now can't hold it against him legally, Mr. Caswell was in prison for a few years. He's become my primary person-of-interest, and I would like to talk to him."

"...in prison for a few years.' How long, damn it? I did a lot of business with that Irishman!"

Although she would have preferred otherwise, Bee tried to calm him. "You had no way of knowing. And for all we know, he was reformed by his prison experience and became a model

citizen. I don't care about his business acumen or lack thereof; I only care about his relationship with your daughter. Please sit down, Mr. McBride, and let's talk about that. She might not have mentioned his name, but did she ever describe who she was seeing?"

"She was an adult, Inspector, with her own life. While we worried about her—any responsible parent does—we couldn't meddle that much anymore." He thought a moment and then checked his computer. He offered an address. "That's where he lived, although I've never been there."

"Yes, we have that address. He's not there now. Are you sure all your business deals were legitimate, Mr. McBride?"

"I thought we weren't going to discuss those. Women! You change your minds on a whim. Must be the hormones." He sighed. "I greased the bureaucratic wheels a bit sometimes, like I said, but no more than others in the Council."

"What did you get out of those deals?"

"Besides the lunches?" She nodded with a smile. "Perhaps empty promises of campaign donations if I ever decide to run for MP. That's the way we run our country, Inspector. I can't enrich myself with deals, but donations to my war chest are acceptable. Someday I want to become an MP. Not soon, of course. Brexit has killed a lot of sympathy for the Tory cause."

She smiled. "Yes, I understand a campaign usually requires funds any ordinary citizen doesn't have, even someone as well established as you are. I see campaign donations as something like bribes, though. Not exactly a *quid pro quo*, but close to it, don't you think?"

"Um, let me propose a counterargument: Let's say you, Inspector Berkeley, hate seeing rhinos die in Africa because some Chinaman wants powdered rhino horn to improve his love life, so you try to drum up support for the WWF. Isn't that the same thing?"

"Rhinos don't control people's lives; politicians do." Bee said. "We'll be asking your PA to send along a list of your business deals with Mr. Caswell, aka his promises of campaign donations. Don't worry. It will be entirely confidential and will only be used to help us find Denise's killer."

"You'll need a warrant for that."

"That can easily be arranged."

"So, Wright aka Caswell is a POI again, this time for Denise McBride," Bee told Oscar after returning to the nick. "With Gladys and Roy both absent, I guess I'm the one who needs to pester the Super and get a warrant for the Caswell-McBride business deals."

"Is that wanker an elected official?"

"He's named by the Lord Mayor and serves at his pleasure. His position is part-time, but I'd bet he receives more for that than you do for full-time work, my friend. It's called 'being connected.' I'm also betting much of his income comes from other business deals. That part-time pay from Bridgeton probably doesn't even cover his greens' fees at the country club. Did you have any luck at the stables?" Not having seen any stables at the McBride homestead, Bee had figured Denise did her riding elsewhere, so Oscar had been given the task of finding out where.

"I have an appointment to talk with the old man who runs the place where she most recently practiced, an old farm where other toffs board their steeds. Probably a waste of time, but no stone unturned, as they say."

"Not a waste of time if Wright accompanied her sometimes."

Oscar nodded. "I see your point."

“Let me know if that visit leads to anything, in particular, the whereabouts of Dan Wright. That we’d have to pass on to Tod as well if it seemed reliable information. I’ll work on the damn warrant.”

She watched him go. *How do I get him to take his exams? He deserves a promotion from DC to DS! But then we’d lose him, wouldn’t we?*

One had to often face that conundrum with good officers. Few among the ambitious wanted to stay where they were just another detective in the ranks. She’d been one recently; perhaps Oscar was another. In her case, her decision was motivated by wanting to avoid the political posturing that went on beyond the inspector level; in his case, it might be the exams themselves, not terribly difficult, but the preparation took time.

She now had to decide whether to call the Super or visit him, the latter requiring a trip to the main station. The visit would require an appointment, so she’d have to call anyway to set that up. She decided to call and was surprised when his PA passed her call along to the VIP.

She explained the need for the warrant. As expected, the Super demurred. *In a sense, both McBride and the Super work for the Lord Mayor!*

“Let me talk to McBride. If I explain the situation, we might avoid the warrant. We can say we’re only interested in his dealings with Mr. Caswell, and I’ll promise to keep everything confidential. You’ll have to back me up on that, of course. The media can’t be allowed to get near this story. I’m sure Martin didn’t know Caswell was a felon.”

“He didn’t know his daughter was seeing the bloke either. I guess they grew apart lately.”

The Super sighed. “That often happens, from teens through university. Only later in life do our children finally realize we knew something about life. I’ll work on McBride and then get back to you. By the way, have you informed NCA about the connection between the two cases?”

“Possible connection. When I know a bit more, I’ll get on the blower and call Tod Bridges.”

“I suggest you do that now. They might be moving on Caswell’s group real soon, and the information might be useful for their effort.”

I can’t see how. “Okay. I’ll try to call him. Thanks, sir.”

“I don’t envy you and your team, Bee. Every day or so, the situation with Caswell becomes more complex. Keep me informed.”

“Will do.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tuesday Morning: At the Stables

DC Oscar Williams found the riding stables that Denise had recently used for practice deserted—no caretaker and no other riders were present at the old farm. Its location was not far from Riverton, which meant rural and off the main road from London to Oxford like Bridgeton, only more so. After turning off the highway onto a winding country lane, Oscar had found it ended in a long drive that wound up to an old stone house that looked like it should have been condemned long ago, but there were outbuildings that looked to be in better shape. In the last century—no, maybe the nineteenth—the farm could have been a refuge for some rich lord and his family who'd wanted to escape the pressures of living in urban London. The place could still be fixed up nicely with a large infusion of funds, but Oscar assumed maybe the remnants of that clan couldn't be bothered, if it still existed.

So, the property was now used by other rich families who needed space to stable their horses. They could be seen grazing in large corrals, from old nags to healthy-looking steeds that might be competitors, either in polo or competition riding. He wondered which ones belonged to Denise McBride.

Maybe the horses run the place? he thought as he walked around, at first finding no one. *Where is that old fellow Arthur I talked with? He'll have all the answers to my questions.*

Oscar finally found him in the last outbuilding he checked, the one farthest from the old house, more like a barn that had probably been used more for other livestock at one time, not horses. His eyes tracked the body swinging from the rafters, and he began to feel sick to his stomach.

There was no evidence of suicide: no stools or chairs or hay bales tossed aside. But someone had hung the old man as if he'd been a spy for the Third Reich. His eyes were bulging and his tongue protruding, and he was quite dead.

Oscar backed out of that crime scene and called Bee. She arrived not long after the pathologist and SOCOs.

"Poor fellow," Bee said as she watched three of the SOCOs under the watchful supervision of Phil Martin lower Arthur Goode to the ground after removing his rope necktie.

"No wonder the public doesn't like to talk to you plods," Dr. Gwen said. "It's bad for one's health."

Bee didn't know if she meant that as a joke—black humor if so. Bee ignored the comment. "This second murder possibly suggests the same thing as the first: Arthur Goode and Denise McBride probably knew too much, so they were silenced before they could talk."

"And it's somehow connected to horse riding?" Oscar said.

"That's obvious," Dr. Gwen said. "Denise was an equestrian and was placed on that statue because of it; Arthur took care of their horses. But that might be all there is to it."

"That's not enough to motivate two murders," Bee said. "Not that I particular care about motivation right now. We still don't know if Caswell was ever here, but let's presume he was. What could Denise and Arthur have possibly known about this place that would put him or his group in danger?"

"I'm sure happy I don't have your job," Gwen said. "It will be a challenge to answer those questions, I'm certain."

“But you can tell us how Arthur was killed, Gwen. There might be some similarities to Denise’s case.”

Gwen’s expression said an emphatic no, but Bee ignored that too. She turned to Oscar. “Give a yell back to HQ. I want PCs, PSs out here—everyone we can spare. We’re going to go over every inch of this place, including that old house, assuming it’s safe to go inside.”

“Now that might lead to something,” Gwen said. “Your scrotes might be using this place for other things. Some kind of illegal activities, I dare say.”

“Like burying bodies?” Oscar said. Gwen shrugged. “Might be just one scrote, Dan Wright aka Caswell?”

“You’re thinking about the same possibility as I am. Let’s say he came here with Denise and liked that the place was out of the way and basically abandoned. I’m assuming Arthur Goode lived nearby and was caretaker, groundskeeper, guard, all in one—a bloke who kept an eye on the property for the owner. Who is the owner, by the way?”

“Arthur said it’s now a holding company whose owners want to wait and see if the property accrues value. It remained in the black with all the equestrian activities.”

“Want to sing in my chorus and bet that Martin McBride is a member of its board of directors?”

“With maybe Dan Caswell?”

“Only after he came here with Denise, I’m guessing. Let us know when you’ll do the PM, Gwen.”

The pathologist was watching the SOCOs struggling to erect the tent in the tight quarters of the barn, but she finally lost patience. “Forget the damn tent, you fools! That roof looks solid enough to keep out the mist and rain. I need to get on with my job!”

Bee didn’t know if Gwen had heard her but decided it was time to make a retreat. She gestured to Oscar to follow her to the car.

“After you get things generally sorted here, follow up on your idea that this might be the spot where some bodies are buried. That could go a long way to explain Denise and Arthur’s demise if they learned about it. Or anything else that might explain why they’re dead.”

Oscar nodded. “I’ll be a while.”

“Take all the time you need.”

By late afternoon, Oscar and the team’s work led to results. Multiple bodies were buried near the crime scene and among a copse of trees on the property’s border. IDing them was a challenge still going on but would be possible because they hadn’t been interred that long ago.

“Who had the idea to borrow the cadaver dogs?” Bee asked Oscar.

He smiled. “Phil the SOCO leader. He saw them at work when that old building in Riverton collapsed last year.”

She nodded. “How many bodies have been found?”

“Seven so far, randomly spread all through those back woods. We’ll be solving a few cold cases, Bee.”

“Cold that should have been still active ones. Cold if we knew those people were missing for a while so they became a cold case. Friends, relatives, and associates often remain mum, though, if the victims were doing something illegal. I’m guessing Wright and associates were using the stables all along, even before he and his friends bought the place. Their mistake was to not make Denise and Arthur disappear as well. We’d still be thrashing around.”

“He probably didn’t have time for Arthur. The old man might have even told Wright that we were going to talk to him, so Wright decided he had to act fast. Arthur might not have known about the bodies, but Wright was afraid he knew or suspected something. And Arthur knew Dan Wright aka Caswell very well by that time as Denise’s pudgy boyfriend, so her murder might have got him thinking.” Oscar paused to gather his thoughts. “Maybe the way Wright displayed Denise atop the statue was even an ego trip for him that warned Arthur? Wright wanted everyone to see what he could do to someone who rejected his advances. Another Greg Elston!”

“I think Wright’s action was more premeditated than Elston’s. He’d been rejected twice. He also had a lot more money, so he thought women should flock to him more for just that.”

“So, you think she was killed there at the stables and then taken to the park?” Bee shrugged. “In any case, not at the park. Too public. I hope Phil and friends might be able to prove that some way, not that it matters much. It does make sense, though, that she came here alone to ride, and Wright took advantage of her visit and killed her.”

“Once we’ve nicked him, we can ask.”

“And there’s the crux of the matter. Still! Where is Mr. Wright? Could he be one of the bodies we haven’t yet found?”

Bee slapped the top of her desk. “That’s Oscar thinking outside the box! Maybe Wright’s associates decided he knew too much. Pass that idea on to our troops. I’d prefer to find him alive to answer a few questions, but he might be dead. Denise might have discovered something that sealed his fate as well. And Arthur’s only error was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Fortunately, he doesn’t seem to have a family who will miss him, just friends from over the years who will not only wonder but expect us to do our duty and find who killed him.”

“That we know of. And that would be sad. Maybe he just kept himself to himself. Who are all these people buried out there in the woods? Owners of properties around here or from elsewhere who didn’t want to sell to Wright and his associates?”

“The NCA task force is probably still gathering evidence against all the members in Wright’s group of associates. Could refusal to sell trigger a death sentence? Seems a bit extreme. And greedy because they’d would only need a small percentage to sell to turn the scam into a success. In any case, I think NCA should wait a bit longer to launch their raid. We might find a lot more to charge Wright’s friends with. I’d better call Tod.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Friday Morning: At NCA's Local HQ

Bee had mixed emotions as she joined the NCA agents in the same room where she'd originally met Leroy. Karen and Max were there, which buoyed her up, and both MI5 and NCA labs had helped in identifying most of the bodies found at the stables. Most weren't locals, so there would be some serious cross-county kidnapping charges to go along with the murders, although the latter would dominate in the eyes of the CPS.

At least she had received a bit more respect, even from Roy Westwood. She had tied together two crimes, the investigation into Denise McBride's murder and the estate scam organized by Dan Wright and friends, with Wright aka Caswell being the major suspect for multiple murders, including Denise and Arthur's.

She was there more to learn additional details about how the estate scam involved local political leaders. NCA agents had that information and would pass it on, more because they needed local police to help apprehend the politicians involved than out of the goodness of their hearts.

And the meeting wasn't entirely local either. Multiple NCA offices around the UK were connected via Zoom. For the first time, Bee saw the person from the Home Office responsible for the countrywide effort. No one bothered to introduce her, but Bee learned who she was from Tod after the meeting.

"She was a surprise," Bee told Tod, eying him over the brim of her coffee cup during a break.

"There are other women besides you who can run things quite well. We're a modern agency in that way, you know."

"With a lot of misogynistic males still hanging around. And Roy certainly didn't look so happy about her running the meeting."

Tod shrugged. "Roy Westwood is an anachronism, Inspector. You of all people should know that."

She smiled and tapped her head. "Yes, he's a throwback, but he's still a good detective. Don't take it the wrong way, but he has a lot more experience than you or most other NCA agents. The NCA has only existed since 2013, after all, and you can't claim that all new hires came from police districts in the UK with a lot of experience."

"Point taken. In any case, with the information we now have because of these recent developments, we're nearly ready to clean up this estate scam. I'm afraid some local VIPs will find themselves on the wrong side of the law."

"As an ex-US president once learned the hard way, even just bank fraud is a crime. From what I heard, some of their guilt can be written off as not realizing that a get-rich scheme offered to them was too good to be true. The court cases will take forever. And murder charges complicate everything."

"Might as well get on with it then, right?"

Tod smiled and nodded.

Bee heard about Karen and Max's takedown of Dan Wright aka Caswell days after it happened. It was a coincidence that storming a house in Riverton not far from the stables produced not only three of the nationwide scam's participants but also Dan himself. They'd been

playing cards, oblivious to all NCA's action. The task force's countrywide raids occurred near enough to the same time that the quartet had no idea what was happening.

Three of the four just surrendered. Dan did a runner through an overgrown garden to an alley in the back of the house, but Max gave chase until the wanker stopped, spun, and faced Max with knife in hand.

"How'd you find me?" the pudgy bastard said, panting.

Too much the good life, Max thought. His own pulse rate was already near normal. "One of your mate's there inside bragged a bit too much to several women. We knew you didn't hang out at the stables, but you were nearby. Call it good police work and good luck. Now drop the knife. It doesn't give you any advantage."

"Why not? You're unarmed!"

"Have you ever faced an ex-Royal Marine with martial arts skills?"

"No, but you'll bleed just like any other motherfucker."

With that, Dan lunged at Max, who stepped aside, chopped down on the knife arm with his left hand and smashed a fist into the man's chest with his right, leaving Dan on the ground gasping for air. Max kicked the knife aside.

Max picked Dan up, pinned his arms behind him, and put on the cuffs. He then read him his rights as dictated by the CPS.

"Were you worried?" he said to Karen when Dan and Max returned to the house.

"Yes, that you might kill the eejit. Not that he doesn't deserve it."

"Not our decision, but I'll state for your ears only: I wish we still hanged murderers."

"We might not know how many at the stables were really his work. Might be only Denise and Arthur." Karen sighed.

"I didn't murder anyone," Dan said.

"Oh, I'm sure your DNA will match that gathered from the statue in the park by our SOCOs," Max said. "That's all we'll need."

Karen nodded. After careful lab work, they'd found DNA samples on the underside of the tethers that had held Denise to the statue's top. It didn't belong to Denise, but they couldn't be sure it was Wright's until now.

"Of course, your associates might grass on you to lessen their sentences," Karen said. "You might face more charges, Mr. Wright." She got in his face. "You know, I always thought you were a sloppy little fat weasel. I'm a good judge of character, you see."

"Do you realize what you've done, Inspector Berkeley?" the Chief Superintendent of Detectives asked Bee after she took her seat. Karen and Max were already seated.

Bee, Karen, and Max had been invited to the Super's office for a PM of the countrywide operation and how it affected Bridgeton. She personally thought it was too early to make a good analysis of the results but still would enjoy seeing a few political VIPs squirming. The Super wouldn't be among them, though, but some friends might be.

Consequently, the atmosphere in the room was charged. Bee could predict criticism from the VIPs present, who were all nervous yet scowling at the three officers present. Bee expected a bollocking, yet she didn't understand why. She was on her guard and felt compelled to protect her young sergeants and other members of her team.

"What my team, other police teams, and NCA agents have done, sir. I'd call it a major house cleaning." She winked at Karen and Max.

"Most of the Council must resign at the very least. Only the Lord Mayor is truly safe."

“Until the next election? He might pay dearly in the voting for not knowing what his own Council was up to. And you, sir, are also safe.”

“So be it.”

Roy Westwood smiled at her. *Did I finally convince him that a woman can manage a police investigation?* “And the Lord Mayor will be a lot better off than the ones going to jail—Martin McBride, for example.”

“Oh, Martin has already received his major punishment,” the Super said. “Knowing he essentially caused his own daughter’s murder will haunt him for the rest of his life.”

Bee shrugged and continued her analysis. “The Lord Mayor will have to name some new council members. That’s the proper thing to do. He can’t resign. That would be like an admission of guilt and create a complete cockup in local government.”

“Indeed. And similar things will be occurring around the UK in many places now. You will keep parts of NCA busy for years to come, Inspector.”

She smiled. “How’s the Home Secretary taking it?”

“He’s not taking the Prime Minister’s criticism very well, although he has nothing to complain about on how NCA pulled off the raid. There might be a few changes nationally at high levels too, although none of the scandal seems to affect current MPs.”

“I’d say that only means they haven’t looked hard enough. Dan Wright aka Caswell was only a small player, more a hitman than businessman. His group offered a very easy get-rich-quick scheme that would be hard to pass up. NCA is bound to find some VIPs who participated, and they could very well be MPs. The Home Office can’t possibly sweep all the dirt under their fancy rugs, sir.”

“They will try,” the Super said. “Which is why I’m asking you to resign.”

Bee’s smile turned to a stony frown. “Just try to make that happen! You’ll have a revolt on your hands, gentlemen! Even among the NCA agents. You cannot expect police officers and NCA agents to do their jobs and then fire them for doing the work you asked them to do.” She stood and pointed a finger at the Super. “We’ll take you to court! Fair warning: This Bee can really sting!”

She turned, stomped out, along with Karen and Max, and the latter slammed the door behind him.

“I told you,” Roy said to the Super. “Your best choice to replace Gladys Harkness is Bee Berkeley. If she’ll accept the position, that is.”

As a result of her accident, the DCI had decided to take early retirement. She’d told Bee that she had no aspirations to become another Ironside scooting around a station not designed for wheelchairs.

“Yes, we’ll try that, although she might think we’re trying to bribe her to ensure her silence.”

“I wouldn’t call it a bribe. I’d call it a necessity. She’s not political, sir; she’s a good copper, just like Gladys.”

The Super smiled. “You’re correct, Roy: She’s not political in the way we are. But she wields political power well. I wouldn’t have hired her away from the Met otherwise.” He sighed. “With luck, she and her kind will be the future of honest policing in the UK.” He laughed. “I think I should have broached the idea a bit better, don’t you?”

Roy nodded. “She’s a good detective, sir. She knew something was going on the moment she walked into the room. You’ll surprise her with the offer, but you might want to be quick to

make it.” The Super asked why. “She’s well-connected to stars in the legal profession through her ex-husband. She might already be calling people to hit us with a lawsuit.”

The Super laughed. “I’ll get right on it.”

“She might turn you down.”

“Because she’s happy where she is?”

“That, and she knows I’m just temporary. In that case, what she does depends on who you offer the DCI job to.”

“In that case, I’ll get her input.”

SAMPLE

Note from Steve

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

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

The setting for this work of short fiction isn't all that different from some of my other British-style mysteries. Like Riverford, Bridgeton is a creation of my imagination. The first, appearing in the first two collections of *Sleuthing, British-Style* (the first collection is available wherever quality ebooks are sold, even on Amazon, while the second is another free PDF download), is a bit nearer Oxford while Bridgeton is nearer London, but both are in the Thames River Valley that stretches from east to west along M40/A40 (the London to Oxford trip taking about two hours).

In real life, this latter setting is indeed part of the greater London conurbation, an area that's a haven for people of means who want to escape the Big Smoke. Because they tend to be well off financially, services follow them from the city to add to those already existing in the Valley. It all represents the English version of urban sprawl so common in the US in the New York City, Washington D.C., or LA areas, and it surely attracts criminal elements who, like more respectable merchants and other service providers, follow the money from east to west.

Bee Berkeley, of course, is part of this Londoners' diaspora now residing in the Thames Valley, but more as a fugitive from the painful loss of her barrister husband. In this story, Carlos Lobo-Guerrero is already very much a part of her home life. (The interested reader can peruse the historical details of their relationship by reading the stories in the first collection.) She's still getting used to her "new patch," and both police and criminal elements often don't make it easy for her.

Like many of my female main characters (and there are many), Bee is a strong, intelligent woman who can stand up to a misogynistic man if needs be, but she's also willing to work with one when she's treated with respect. She provides her Bridgeton PD substation with experience and solid policing skills that make her a solid candidate to replace DCI Gladys Harkness. Will she accept that job offer or pursue another career in academia? Maybe that's a question to be answered in another story?

Of course, this story isn't a novel, so I must apologize for not developing characters and plots more fully. What I did accomplish was something we often forget in both UK and US crime stories. In this fourth and much longer story featuring DI Belinda "Bee" Berkeley, I wanted to present some ideas about how police forces must manage crowded schedules and minimal staffing. Despite the linear portrayals found in many crime stories, real police are often trying to solve various cases at once, and these can become complicated by having to cooperate with national police efforts. In the US, that would be local police working with the DEA, DHS, FBI, or even the CIA; in the UK, that would be local police working with the NCA or even MI5 and MI6. So here you have Bee juggling three cases, two local ones plus one with the NCA. And in the first chapter, she's just finished one that's wedged between the stories in the first collection and this one!

If you met Bee and some of her investigative team in the first volume, their introductions here might seem repetitive. I apologize for that too. I tried to make this volume independent from the first. However, because that first volume is also a free PDF download, you might want to read the first story in the first collection at least because it's the tale of Bee's first Bridgeton case.

My take on how local police work with MI5 and NCA in the UK isn't much more of an extrapolation than how local and state police work with the US's many national agencies (most notably the FBI). MI5 has been around for a long time, along with SIS, the formal name of MI6. NCA is relatively new, though. Created in 2013 along with the reorganization of Scottish police departments into Police Scotland, it's not a stretch to assume it still suffers some growing pains

as it deals with nationwide crime, mostly drugs interdiction, human trafficking, and other organized crime activities. In this story, it simply represents how a national agency can interfere with local efforts simply because it's focused on the "big picture." (In the US, how the FBI plays with local police departments provides these types of plot elements as well, as readers can see in the various novels of the "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco" series.) Of course, the tensions imagined here are on a par with the fictionalized treatments of the CIA and MI6. (And no, Sir Richard Moore, KCMG, current Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) aka MI6, is not my relative!)

Because this free PDF download is all DIY (including the brazenly self-promoting cover!), I only need to thank my wonderful wife, another strong, intelligent woman, for supporting my writing efforts all these many years. She's been a constant cheerleader despite the ups and downs in my writing career that she's seen by my side.

Steven M. Moore

Montclair, NJ, 2023

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.