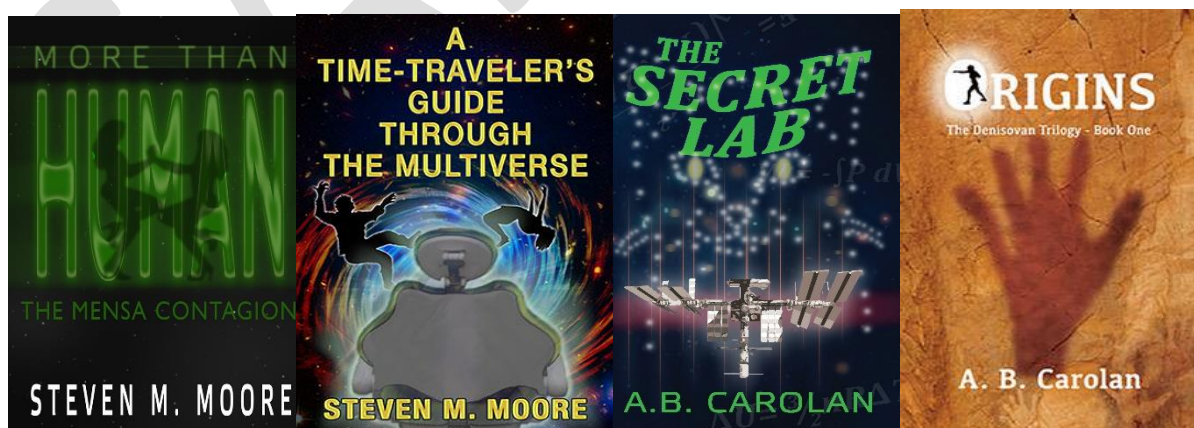




Castilblanco Redux Plus Two: Three Crime Novellas that Bridge the Pond

Steven M. Moore



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

**Castilblanco Redux plus Two:
Three Crime Novellas that Bridge the Pond**

“Aging Gracefully”

“A Yorkshire Tale”

“Initiation”

Steven M. Moore

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Preface

Some readers might have perused novels in the “Detectives Chen & Castilblanco” series, so these NYPD homicide detectives might already be old friends. Some might also know about their relationship with the main characters in the “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” series, most notably in the free crossover novel *Defanging the Red Dragon*. The first novella in this collection therefore might just be a welcome opportunity to say hello again to NYC and Rolando Castilblanco.

Unlike the main characters in the “Esther Brookstone” series, the other two novellas feature a British detective who might have barely heard about Esther and Bastiann van Coevorden and has probably heard nothing about Mr. C. Like that American detective, though, Matt Cooper has a few problems with authority figures in the two British-style mystery novellas also included in this collection.

I’ve put all three novellas together as a mental exercise in comparing policing methods on both sides of the pond. Please let me know what you think about the result using the contact page at my author website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>.
r/Steve Moore

Aging Gracefully: A Castiblanco Tale

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List of Main Characters

Rolando “Rollie” Castiblanco—retired NYPD cop

Pam Stuart—Rollie’s ex-TV reporter wife

Chapter One

Brooklyn, New York

Pam put down her section of the *Times*, removed her reading glasses, and smiled at me. I put down my glass of Jameson—I only did a few sips now, still neat—and smiled back. Drinking that brew never had been an homage to the stereotypical Irish cops in the NYPD. I just preferred it over other whiskeys—bourbon too biting, scotch too smoky—and whiskey over rum and coke or some other drink people often consider more typical of Puerto Ricans. Maybe I had acquired enough blarney to make my choice even more logical?

I knew this woman so well now that which smile she was flashing me was obvious: She was going to propose something that I might not be keen on doing but would willingly do if I could because she's the love of my life. There might even be an argument that I knew I'd probably lose, again willingly. After all, the man is the king of his castle until the queen arrives, as they say. That's a rule for any man to live by when it came to his woman! And in my case, I figured I was lucky to have her.

Let's face it: I've always looked like many of the thugs I've often pursued and arrested, and that never changed for the better as I aged. I'm a bear of a man, always have been, from the time when I was still a young and nimble Navy SEAL traipsing around in the Middle East to when I walked out the precinct's doors to become ex-Sergeant Rolando Castiblanco, celebratory emphasis on "ex."

None of my detective skills involved mind-reading, though, so I waited to hear what *mi mariposa's* sly smile meant, secure in the knowledge that whatever it meant might get me into trouble. That had happened, sometimes getting Pam into trouble as well.

"You know, Rollie, our European trip wasn't exactly the romantic vacation I'd imagined."

Talk about stating the obvious! Assuming her comment was about how the terrorist Kadar had resurrected from the dead to begin his evil campaign by nearly killing me, a very good assumption albeit a bit dated, Pam's observation was an understatement. Or was she referring to our more recent little getaway when we visited Esther and Bastiann in London? That had begun back in New York with an attack on our daughter, Ceci. I ended up working in London to thwart some Chinese agents, so that trip wasn't exactly pleasurable either.

It was unusual and interesting how my "Big Apple beat" prowling for criminal lowlifes on the city's mean streets so often took me elsewhere in the US and abroad. Pursuing the murderer of an FBI agent's son—the agent had been a good friend and became a love interest for my partner Chen—that pursuit had taken me to the Fascist Republic of Texas and had ended in a trip to the Caribbean. (The state had become much worse over the years, a place smart Latinos and women needing abortions had to avoid now because their lives depended on it!) Unlike AOC and all her little commies, I'd seen Cuba wasn't the worker's paradise, but maybe I was just biased after being shot at in Gitmo.

"Don't keep me in suspense, *mi amor*," I said to my wife. "What are you proposing?"

Pam thought a moment. She'd been a TV personality but was without a script writer, so maybe she was looking for the right words to convince me? I knew she would eventually, but I hoped it wasn't a long, drawn-out discussion.

"I was referring to our trip when that awful terrorist was kidnapping those aristocrats," she finally said.

I nodded: That had been my first guess. Kadar had made both our lives and Chen's miserable. Where was this going?

"We could avoid any possibility for a repetition of something like that by taking a river cruise like Esther and Bastiann did for their honeymoon."

"Please remember that Bastiann had to solve a murder case on that riverboat," I said. "That wasn't exactly a joyful and romantic honeymoon for those two old lovebirds."

"Oh, that could never occur again. You're not a cop any longer; I'm not a reporter. Very few people even know we exist anymore. Our kids now live more dangerous lives than we do."

I wasn't going to argue with her about that—Ceci was a CSI and Pedro was a cop, and both had already proven their livelihoods could lead them into danger—but as an ex-cop, I still had many enemies, including some lowlives still in jail who might have it in for me and would soon get out for "good behavior." Even dumb apes with one-track minds can hold a grudge for years!

"I suppose you have a tour already picked out?"

"I do. The same tour in fact with the same riverboat company Esther and Bastiann used." She smiled. This was now one of her gotcha-smiles. "Less chance of a repeat if I understand Bayesian statistics at all."

Bayesian statistics? Is that a thing? What the hell has she been reading? Pam had always been more curious and self-taught than I am. Her work had covered lots of topics with interviews of many so-called experts on many things. The perps I'd caught were generally the dumb ones. The smart perps, often psychotic sociopaths, used their better brains to commit evil deeds, an exception being a certain ex-president who wasn't smart at all and just barely escaped serious jail time...and maybe a firing squad for being a traitor?

"Are we doing Munich or Prague before the riverboat cruise?" I knew something about Esther and Bastiann's trip, more his version than hers.

"No. This will be a trial run for you. It should be easy. They have one-, two-, or three-level difficulty ratings for their land tours, or we can just stay onboard and watch the Danube flow by."

Oh joy, I thought, recalling that all those new fascist European countries we'd also be passing by.

Chapter Two

JFK Airport

Our European super-vacation was delayed!

I knew something was wrong as we sat at our gate at JFK and I heard shots fired. Later I learned that the small group of terrorists had broken through TSA security, killing three poor agents on their way to our gate.

When they arrived, I saw they were dressed in business suits. (I suppose full military regalia might have been suspicious.) They were waving pistols with huge magazines hanging from their undersides; I guessed they had more mags in their pockets. TSAs' scanners would have spotted those weapons obviously, so that must be why they'd broken through the security station. An obvious point of failure! Maybe TSA needed to screen people as they entered the terminal instead?

Domestic terrorism had plagued the US even before that ex-president had tried to overthrow the US government claiming fraud in that election where he'd been the big loser. Militia members from California had participated in a crazy cartel leader's plan to take over most of the American drug trade that oxycontin manufacturers had shown to be so profitable. Al Qaeda terrorists had participated as well. It had been a huge cluster-fuck that had almost killed Hal, an American Interpol colleague of the Dutch Bastiann; they'd become consultants for MI5. I knew all this for multiple reasons, the last because of submarines. Long story!

Our terrorists didn't wear red hats, big sombreros, or military helmets, some apparel that might have made security agents wonder. They looked more like young businessmen off to have a good time at a boondoggling meeting somewhere in Europe. I bided my time, thinking about one, what they intended to accomplish, and two, what I could do to help prevent it. It was clear that the terminal would soon be invaded by US agents of all types. In a firefight, innocent people could die. Shit, Pam and I could die! Not exactly the vacation she'd wanted!

Sometimes on a case, Chen or I discussed a perp's possible motives. Knowing them could help us solve the case. The weird cases were those we solved without ever learning the motives. In Europe, the case of that terrorist Kadar had almost been like that. He'd had a whole lot of so-called "counterterrorism experts" baffled. There'd been a clear motive, a terrible one, to be honest, so we'd been lucky to stop him.

Consequently, I couldn't help wondering what these domestic terrorists' motives were. With all the airport's security around and more on call who'd be there in minutes, why take the risk of mounting what could very well be a suicide op for them?

Suicide? My memories time-traveled back to 9/11/2001! Our plane wasn't a good one to hijack to Cuba or anywhere else. It was a huge jumbo with a lot of twelve-seat rows in a 3-6-3 combo separated by two aisles. I used my smart phone to find out where it was headed after Frankfurt, Germany, hoping that would provide a clue. The answer I got was Tel Aviv, Israel.

Despite that crazy ex-president's efforts—he'd encouraged the Israelis to make Jerusalem their new capital, pissing off a lot of Muslims and even Christians who shared that holy city as a shrine—Tel Aviv was still the most important city in Israel for multiple reasons, mostly economic. It was a safe assumption that the SOBs at JFK wanted to go there, although the plane would have enough fuel to go to other places. And big cities don't only exist in America! London or Paris could also be a target. (The jumbo would need a large airport to land, if a landing was in the terrorists' plan.)

As the terrorists tried to maintain control of a lot of frightened passengers, I studied them. They were black-haired, brown-eyed, and swarthy-skinned, but hell, that describes me as well! They could be from anywhere and fanatics about anything.

I moved closer to a subset of them to try to determine their language. A gun swung in my direction to cover me.

“Drinking fountain,” I said, pointing.

The terrorist nodded, giving his permission. I barely rinsed out my mouth because my nerves were already making my old bladder go spastic. I didn’t want to miss a chance to do something clever by having to pee!

The trip to the water cooler was worth it, though. They spoke Farsi. I know some Farsi. The SOBs were Iranians. They weren’t domestic terrorists!

How did they get into the US? And what the hell were they going to do with our jumbo jet? After I sat down again and ate half a candy bar Pam handed to me, I returned to my original worry. Terrorists had turned planes into flying bombs on 9/11, killing thousands of people. Were they planning to take the long trip through Frankfurt all the way to Tel Aviv to do the same thing?

I couldn’t imagine that the US or its allies would allow them to do that. Push comes to shove, wouldn’t US or European fighters shoot down the plane? Were these guys stupid?

Things have been dicey with Iran for quite a while. That had been started when that moronic ex-president ended the nuclear agreement between Iran and the West, although the fanatics there probably wouldn’t have abided by it anyway. They had been upping their game over the years, creating more terrorists with their proclamations against the Great Satan and its allies, especially Israel.

The “October 7th” massacre engineered by Hamas had been funded and promoted by Iran, for example. An undeclared war on the Jewish state was also part of a proxy war in support of Putin, including arms shipments to Russia when that old KGB bastard bit off more than he could chew with Ukraine. The world had become less safe as autocrats teamed up to destroy democracies, Iran one of the leaders in that campaign. The evil theocracy of the fascist Ayatollah was still an autocracy.

I’d factored in the advances of fascism in the world when making my decision about doing our cruise down the Danube. Many countries along that route had become fascist vassal states of Putin’s new version of the USSR, an unofficial hegemony that made him into a virtual czar. Any ideological pretense of championing the rights of workers in the world, long used by Lenin, Stalin, and other Russian leaders, even Hitler and his National Socialists, no longer existed. Most sane people knew that communism was a debunked ideology. Putin had achieved what fascists in America wanted to accomplish as well; the “blue states,” containing the majority of Americans and all the sane ones, were the only thing holding the fascists at bay now, but I had to wonder when the new civil war would start.

Consequently, I felt Pam and I would be a lot safer cruising down the Danube than visiting an unwelcoming Texas where they hated progressive Latinos or ex-news reporters who’d told the truth about crimes against women that so often occurred in those “pro-life states,” the very epitome of an oxymoron from millions of morons. The EU had become a lot saner than the US, so much so that most Europeans had decided we weren’t worth listening to.

Was this airport op Iran’s answer to its traditional enemies? It seemed a bad plan, unless.... I smiled at the Iranian who was still watching me like a carrion bird waiting for his

prey to die ...unless there were people in our plane the West wanted to keep alive who could serve as hostages?

SAMPLE

Chapter Three

Jewish Band on a Plane

“You’re up on the news,” I whispered to Pam in Spanish so the terrorists wouldn’t understand even if they heard it. (Probably twenty percent of the crowd were speaking other languages besides English and Farsi. Thank the Great Buddha for America’s diversity!) “You read the *Times* this morning; I didn’t. Are there any VIPs on this plane?”

She nodded. “You might call them that if you were a lot younger. A new and very popular Israeli rock group performed in DC and New York and are heading home. Didn’t you notice all the screaming teens waiting for them to exit the lounge and head for the gate?”

I nodded. Had wondered about all those young kids who didn’t seem to be traveling anywhere. Also wondered why they weren’t working. I was at that age if not in school. Different times, I guess.

Rock music had fans worldwide now: “boy bands” from Seoul, Indian groups from Delhi, and even Russian bands who often angered old man Putin by thumbing their noses at him with the music and lyrics. (They all too often suffered the consequences, of course.) Why not an Israeli rock band?

Obviously, these terrorists wouldn’t be interested in rock, the music of the Great Satan. (Although I’d be willing to bet teenage Iranians would have other opinions, even though the musicians were Jews.) Our terrorists wouldn’t be interested in musicians either, per se. Like their toadies Hamas and Hezbollah often do, these Iranians would only be interested in using them as human shields so the plane wouldn’t be shot down. And destroying a rock group could be a PR positive for them in the eyes of the Ayatollah even if they failed to use the plane as a flying bomb, as Hamas terrorists had shown when they’d attacked that rock concert near Gaza a while ago.

All the other passengers also along for the ride would add to the US and its allies’ hesitation when deciding to shoot down the plane. That would probably depend a lot on their target. What could it be? There were so many possibilities!

Around that time, I began to see armed men in battle fatigues moving in to surround our gate’s waiting area, both inside and outside. The Iranians noticed them too. The fellow who gave me the okay to visit the water cooler took out his phone and made a call (latest model iPhone, of course). I took out my phone too. (I no longer had an NYPD-issued one, so it was my old personal Android.)

I thought it was odd that the Iranians hadn’t confiscated all our phones, but I figured their mistake was my opportunity. I dialed the number of an FBI agent I know very well. Lou Rogers was one of the good ones, someone I had confidence in; i.e., he was the exception rather than the rule. I detested most Feds because they were arrogant, bossy, and secretive for the most part. Many cops thought the same way even though we had to work with the SOBs of course. (A lot better at that than the Dems and fascists in the US Congress are, to be honest.) Even Chen’s hubby, an ATF agent, was a bit hard to take!

Lou didn’t pick up. Halfway through a text message to him, my phone was slapped out of my hand. The water-cooler guy wagged his index finger at me. Two terrorists were now confiscating phones and tossing them into plastic garbage bags. Mine on the floor went into a bag as well.

I expected water-cooler guy to hit me too, so I jumped him. Big mistake! He was as fast as a puma trying to cross I-5 on California's Grapevine (a deathtrap for the big cats some LA friends had told me about). My expectations were realized: He used his pistol like a club to put me down. I shook my head to clear the cobwebs away. *Concussion?*

"Try that again, Mr. Castiblanco, and you'll be a dead man!"

That changed everything! How did these bozos know my name?

Some security agent with a megaphone chose that moment to say from outside the gate, "Put down your guns. We have the entire gate area surrounded. Just one passenger killed means you all will die."

I thought that agent's threat was good one and welcome, but he might believe I was dead. To protect the plane's other passengers, I rose from the floor.

"They know your name, Rollie!" Pam said as I retook my seat beside her, eyeing water-cooler man who'd moved on. Her emotional whisper said a lot about the danger she was feeling. *Damn! She hadn't signed up for this!*

I shrugged. "Simple as taking my pic with his fancy phone and texting an accomplice on the outside somewhere with my pic attached to see who I am. I'm not as well known internationally as I am to New York's underworld, but they were probably checking for other passengers who'd make good human shields for them. I doubt it's any consolation, but they probably know who you are as well. Nobody has any privacy anymore in this world filled with smart phones!"

"What are we going to do?"

"What you're going to do, *mariposita*, not we, is use your phone to send a text to someone for me. You told me that you were able to do that with Epstein using your phone, even though it was in your coat pocket, when Kadar's group held you hostage, right?"

"Wrong! I just dialed her, kept the line open, and talked to the terrorists. No text involved."

"Um, okay. Make that call then, and I'll talk to your purse, pretending I'm looking for something. I got it: Rub your eyes as if your contacts are bothering you and you want me to find your eyedrops."

I got my message through to Lou in twenty seconds: "Disable the damn plane!" Of course, he didn't pick up, but would he get the voicemail?

Chapter Four

The Plan

My plan was simple: I didn't want anyone to get on that jumbo, least of all the terrorists. They might get antsy and kill most of us, but I wanted to make sure that plane didn't become a flying bomb.

I felt some misgivings about that plan, but there was a precedent: In the 9/11 attacks, the heroes of United Airlines Flight 93 made that plane crash in Pennsylvania. The passengers had all died, but the damn terrorists died too and weren't able to send another flying bomb into the US Capitol. (It was ironic that a certain ex-president tried to stage a coup there that could have finished that job!) Maybe their decision had been a consensus between the majority of passengers on Flight 93, so my decision was different. It was a unilateral one and maybe not necessarily something all the passengers at the gate would have agreed to, but I had no information about who or what the terrorists were going after. For all I knew, the Israeli Parliament was in session, and they were going to take all the MPs out! Or maybe a shrine somewhere, whether Jewish or Christian, both religions enemies of Islam according to the Ayatollah.

My "assume the worst and hope for the better" wasn't much of a plan, but for me the only good terrorist was a dead terrorist. It seemed like I'd been fighting them my whole life. And now they were threatening my wife just like Kadar and his thugs had done years ago.

The standoff continued as I tried to shake off the pounding headache I had from the clubbing I'd received. Thank the Great Buddha for my hard head! There was a lot of talk between water-cooler guy and someone elsewhere, hopefully a security fellow, during the interlude. The terrorist's rage was obvious to every passenger, most of us hearing his masterful command of good old American profanity.

The siege ended with another terrorist receiving a call and giving a message to water-cooler guy. He looked like one of those helium balloons two days after a kid got them for his birthday party: Deflated, frustrated—the poor bastard's hopes for a blazing martyrdom thwarted. He laid down his gun on the floor, a sign for the others to do the same. Maybe they were smart enough to know their personal harem of voluptuous virgins wouldn't be waiting for them in the hell their Ayatollah had created for them?

They'd become all meek and mild. The good guys entered the gate area and handcuffed them all. I thought of the cells in Gitmo in their future. (I'd help saved that base once to continue its use as a prison for terrorists. Can't say it was fun.)

It was a big win! And no one was killed!

I bet you think we didn't make it to that riverboat on time. You'd be wrong. We did! Again, I felt guilty. I'd made that decision to take the chance that the Iranians would just kill us all. Now I felt guilty about our arriving at our destination on time. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Lou had heard my chat with Pam where I'd woven clues into words about her contacts. He's a smart guy. He read the situation correctly and made sure that the jumbo couldn't depart. It wasn't really disabled; it just hadn't been refueled. That was the subject of the call the other terrorist received and relayed to the water-cooler guy, dashing his hopes for leaving on that plane. The Iranians had known they were trapped in the terminal at the gate as a consequence.

It turned out that their target had indeed been Israel's Knesset, just a little detour from Tel Aviv as the jumbo flies. Kind of stupid of the Iranians in hindsight. Why not hijack a plane in London, Paris, or Rome? Maybe they just loved Lufthansa's service? Or had they been training at some flight school in the US like the 9/11 terrorists had in case they had to fly that jumbo? Did I say some terrorists, mostly from Yemen and not Iran, had participated in that plan the cartel had hatched years ago. Terrorists, international or domestic, who've often fried their brains with fanaticism, could become as power-hungry as any other fascists and can work together as allies consequently.

That jumbo finally arrived safely in Frankfurt. By that time, Pam and I were already in Munich waiting for a bus. DHS had chartered an executive jet for us. I suppose you might call it "first-class service." (We'd been in business class on the jumbo because I'm old and want some comfort.) The seats were okay, but there were no drinks or meals offered. I guess I shouldn't complain. A high-speed run to Munich in a corporate jet got us there in time to make the bus for Vilshofen. The riverboat's tour guide was impressed, maybe thinking Pam and I were VIPs? I just hoped I wouldn't have to solve a murder case like poor Bastiann had on his honeymoon trip with Esther!

All this just goes to show that you can be only an average guy and still receive special treatment if the US government wrongly thinks you're some kind of hero. Lou from the FBI and my old friend Ashley Scott from DHS were the ones with the connections and argued for that VIP treatment, not me, because I'm just a retired slob now. They knew I was no hero. I'm just a guy who can't resist finding a way to continue doing his job.

I can't say I'm gracefully aging. I'm sure I have some more gray in my hair after our adventure at that JFK gate to add to that received from many years as a cop. As long as Pam still loves me, age spots, thinning hair, and all, who the hell cares?

A Yorkshire Tale: A British-Style Mystery Steven M. Moore

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List of Main Characters

Delphina “Daffy” Bednarik—young girl who’s Matt’s snout
Andrew Bixby—Superintendent of Detectives for the Rother Valley District
Lynne Bridges—police pathologist
Matt Cooper—Detective Inspector
Kathrine “Kath” Cooper—SOCO and Matt’s sister
Paul Dixon—a radical far-right thug
Peter Grimes—Police Commissioner for the South Sheffield Constabulary
Alan MacDonald—Detective Chief Inspector and Matt’s boss
Dewi Owen—Detective Constable on Matt’s team
Victor Prince—VIP in the *Our Country First* political action group
Rebecca Tilson—Victor Prince’s receptionist
Arnold Trent—Army major and the victim’s son
Chester Trent—the victim
Sam Trout—Detective Sergeant on Matt’s team
Claire Walker—Detective Constable on Matt’s team

Chapter One

Rother Valley District, Wath Police Station

Matt Cooper found a space in the car park far from the entrance to the “newest” South Yorkshire police station. This station belonged to Wath-upon-Deane, and like Rotherham, Maltby, Swinton, Dinnington, and a few other towns and villages hither and yon, they all formed part of the Rother Valley District. He extracted himself from his little car, an old Morris about a size too small even for him, and took stock of his new workplace.

He wasn’t a big man—his rugby-playing days had been mostly spent at the bottom of the scrum—but he was still in fair shape. More a desk jockey now as a Detective Inspector, he had to work to keep fit. His black hair now had a bit of gray above his ears, but his intense, brown eyes weren’t yet hidden by glasses or helped by contacts. His shoulders sloped a bit, though, and for good reason: His new posting wasn’t of his choosing. He’d have adjustments to make.

He’d only visited the station once before for an interview. It was recent but not new construction, yet the old brick building had been refurbished nicely, at least on the outside that included some new landscaping. The trees added around the parcel of land that surrounded the building someday might provide shade for offices inside and even now would give avian bombers numerous hiding places to rest and plan their attacks on the station’s innocent personnel and their vehicles. *Their version of that “Sheffield Blitz” by the Nazis*, he thought with a smile. *Or in honor of the first football goals ever made on Sheffield’s historical pitch?*

He knew his punishment could have been worse: He could have been demoted to uniformed constable and banished to some town like Raimarsh or Laughton. The police commissioner had wanted him completely gone, and Matt had expected that the old pillock would get his way, so he’d studied what skills he needed and bureaucratic hoops he’d have to jump through to become a private investigator if needs be.

Without making a formal announcement, though, his DCI, DSs, and DCs in his old Sheffield department had let it be known via the gossip channels that a whole downtown squad would resign if the commissioner got his way. City Council members had stepped forward as well to rein in the commissioner, citing the negative publicity that would come from it as their main reason. It hadn’t quite been the revolution that had occurred with a previous commissioner and the child abuse scandals, but Matthew Cooper had remained a detective inspector and did not have to become a private investigator.

His would still be an internal transfer because he’d remained in the South Yorkshire Constabulary. He expected that his future cases would only consist of home and business robberies, a few arsons, dealings in drugs, incidents of domestic abuse, and other incidents, but those would be a lot more interesting than the few mispers or divorce cases a PI could expect on his plate. He also expected that he wouldn’t be getting any promotions for a while either. Wath already had a DCI, after all, who might not be too happy about getting a DI now whom the police VIPs loved to hate. He would try Wath as Plan A and make PI work Plan B.

While all that was a lot of baggage affecting his future work, there was at least one major plus to the change: He might be spending a bit more time with his baby sister who was a Scene-of-Crime Officer also working in the Rother Valley District. They’d grown farther apart with his sojourn in Sheffield, widening the gap between them that had already been large because of their difference in ages. She was his only family now.

“The city has the bad habit of chewing up young plods and spitting them out,” DCI Alan MacDonald observed during their very first meeting. The little man behind a big desk smiled at Matt, whose detective’s eye had already noted the man’s nervous habit of smoothing his mustache and goatee. He’d been referring to Sheffield, of course. “Our cases out this way are a lot less stressful, more mundane, and therefore less error-prone, Inspector Cooper. Yet you might get a varied diet here that’s quite different from what you had in Sheffield Central, so be prepared.”

Matt shrugged. “Matt, please, just Matt. So, I’ve heard, sir. I won’t mind some relative peace and quiet for a while, as you might very well understand. I’ll be a good lad and make you and our station look good.”

Now Alan frowned. “I just need you to do your job, Matt. We don’t have specialized divisions here. Personally, I believe no policework is easy, even here with our lack of personnel and limited funding, a situation worsening with time, as it happens. But I insist: I need a good DI who’ll competently pursue what cases we get on our patch.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“Alan is also fine, just between you and me, Matt. Save the formalities for the VIPs. Now let’s go introduce you to your new team. We’re all a bit informal here, to be honest, but you’ll find that we all take our work seriously.”

After Alan introduced Matt to the team—plainclothes detectives and uniformed officers, a small and permanent group of two detective sergeants and four detective constables for the former; sergeants and constables for the latter, their number depending on the number of active cases—Alan departed, and Matt met everyone one-on-one. That took the rest of the day’s normal working hours.

That day ended with some of the team staying behind to brief him on the status of pending and non-routine cases, which weren’t all that many. He noted that the uniformed officers could and did handle quite a few cases that were considered routine, i.e., less demanding or urgent, and only called on the detectives as needed.

Matt was still working in his small office when seven p.m. rolled past. He was going over the names of other personnel who could become involved in a case: scene-of-crime officers, the SOCOs, who included his sister, Kath; psychologists and pathologists, not enough of either; and armed resource officers, the AROs, most ex-military who were well-trained in martial arts as well as being firearms experts. Many of these were shared with other nearby stations in the Rother Valley District, so he knew speedy responses from them might be rare events at times.

He was about to call it a day and head off to his new residence, a one-bedroom flat in a six-story building in Swinton, now completely empty and waiting for his furniture to arrive from downtown, when his ringtone filled his office with an excerpt from the overture to Mozart’s *Magic Flute*. He answered the call after only a few bars.

“Detective Inspector Cooper.”

“Dilbert Winters here, Guv, ye old duty sergeant for tonight. Good I caught you. I’ve a welcoming gift for you, lad. ‘Tis most likely a wee murder case, I dare say.”

Matt noted some details, thanked the old man whom he’d not yet met personally, and went to look for someone, anyone who might have some idea about where he was supposed to go to find the crime scene. He found DC Claire Walker, whom he’d met earlier and now seemed to be now having a relaxed chinwag with some girlfriend. She put the phone down and raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Guv?”

“Please borrow a pool car and meet me out front. We have a case.”

He watched Claire end her conversation and then dash off. *Aims to please the new bloke*, he thought. He had to admire her youthful energy. He had little left at that time of day. *I need some caffeine!* He knew that might not be in the cards until the next morning, and only if he bought some instant on the way to his flat.

Once they were on their way, Matt observed that he didn't really need DC Walker. She'd simply put an address into the little EV's GPS unit. But she knew when to trust the unit and when not, skillfully going around knots of traffic still on the roads at that late hour. The whole South Yorkshire area continued to have commuters traveling in many directions for their commutes, so traffic was often a multi-hour problem in the mornings and evenings. That was ubiquitous in large conurbations; Manchester was even worse.

They arrived at an enclave of small houses and an associated playground, the latter now deserted except for a few rubberneckers standing around and various official vehicles already flooding the area with their nervous blue lights. It was a familiar scene for Matt, only occurring in a different and unfamiliar place now.

A PC with helmet in hand and wearing a wrinkled uniform and mud-spattered shoes—he'd probably been on duty most of the day—approached them. Claire and Matt both flashed their warrant cards, hers a bit more beat up than his because his had been newly reissued to indicate his new post at Wath.

“What's the story, Mr. Sanborn?” Matt asked after noting the officer's name on his swinging old lanyard.

“A wrinkle had his head bashed in, Guv. Doc Bridges is tending to the body now, not that any good can be done for the poor bloke.”

“Is the victim local?”

Sanborn shrugged. “Guess we should find that out, right?”

Matt nodded. “Indeed. I'd appreciate it.” He turned to Claire. “Let's get a house-to-house around here sorted with the help of Mr. Sanborn and his fellow officers. I'm going to make a nuisance of myself by sticking my head in the pathologist's tent, and then I'll join you.”

The tent reeked of feces and urine from cadaveric releases, not all that uncommon and always unpleasant. The pathologist was doing the usual Cossack dance around the body, stopping to do a poke and prod here and there, exactly what not at all obvious to Matt with the doctor's back turned to him.

“I'm Matthew Cooper, the new DI,” he said, and then received a pleasant surprise: He could see that the pathologist was a pleasant-looking woman when she turned to him.

“Too bad we must meet like this, Inspector. I'm Lynne Bridges.”

She nodded towards the body without rising from her squat. *I couldn't ever have done that dance*, he thought. Rugby killed his knees. *I might dance more traditional ones, though*. He reddened slightly, thinking about what “traditional” could mean with the lovely doctor. *Don't be a dirty old man, Inspector!*

“COD: Blunt force trauma to the back of the skull, no weapon yet found. But it could be almost anything. TOD? That's a guess for now, but most likely after five. Some PC told me that's when this neighborhood's children who usually play here leave for home.”

“And no ID for the victim, I suppose?”

“Nothing on him but his old clothes in the pile over there. If he’s from around here, he might not carry ID just for just a wee walk. Same PC said he might live around here. Apparently, a lot of pensioners are sprinkled among these little houses.”

He nodded. “We’ll get an ID, don’t worry. Let me know when you’ll do the PM. Nice meeting, you Dr. Bridges.”

Within the hour, they’d learned that Chester Trent lived in a small house located three blocks from the playground. His neighbor lady had a spare key and let them into the victim’s house, SOCOs first, Kath not a member of that group, and then Claire and Matt, who followed the forensics experts around the house in their own PPE while keeping out of their way.

“Not much to show for the long life that wrinklie had,” Claire observed.

“He had a lot more furniture than I’ll have in my new place even after it arrives. And his life was cut short all the same. We need to find out why and who did it.”

“Um, seems he wasn’t killed here, Guv.”

“Not likely, but the place is still a tip. We’ll wait for the SOCOs to have the last word, though. Moreover, it’s amazing sometimes how fast a murderer can clean up a murder scene if he has his wits about him. Those murders are usually preplanned. And there’s usually evidence for the clean-up.” *Am I trying to impress this detective constable?* He decided to focus, so he made a gesture meant to include the entire house. “This place definitely lacked a woman’s touch.” He saw Claire’s frown. “Just sayin’, Constable. I must admit most blokes are pigs, especially if they live alone like me. Why bother being a neat freak in that case?”

“Don’t invite me to your place, Inspector.”

He thought a moment. “Um, protocol question: Am I shirking my duty? Am I supposed to invite the whole team to a house-warming party or something to celebrate my arrival in Wath?”

She now smiled. “A gathering at a local pub might be more in order. It’s called team building by the police VIPs. We plods tend to call it team spirit...or spirits.”

“I see.” Socializing in Sheffield Central had been a bit hit-and-miss, cliquish, and prone to hidden agendas spurred by work confrontations and jealousies—not unusual for any large organization. “I’d imagine that people have better things to do, especially plods with families.”

“No family, Inspector?”

“Mum and Pop are already in the ground. And a very young baby sister is a SOCO here, but not in this group. I’m not as young as I look.”

“Young for a DI maybe?”

“Some good luck on a few early cases, more like it. And the current commissioner maybe thought I’d been promoted too soon. Of course, he was looking to, shall we say, unpromote me.” Matt pointed to a picture of Chester Trent standing and smiling next to a younger man in uniform. “Looks like our old victim has a son in His Majesty’s armed forces. We’d better find that bloke. Otherwise, he might see it in a media report first, not necessarily a good thing, considering their sensationalist proclivities.”

Chapter Two

At the Morgue

For his first time as a detective, going all the way back to his promotion from uniformed sergeant to plainclothes constable, i.e., PS to DC, Matt Cooper looked forward to his meeting with a police pathologist. Somehow the bright woman he'd met at the crime scene made the distasteful drudgery of a PM a lot more bearable...and life in general, for that matter, as he temporarily forgot about political police VIPS out to get him and focused on Dr. Bridge's lovely face and expert words. *Maybe I'm just a pathetic, lonely prat like Kath always tells me?*

They talked about the case, of course, not about either her or him. They were both professionals.

"There aren't many details to add to what I said at the crime scene, Inspector. There's this, though." She lifted the sheet and then the victim's arm. "His birth name might not have been Chester Trent."

"Does that tattoo mean something to you?"

"If we hadn't been in nappies or among the unborn, we'd have seen it back in the late thirties to the early sixties on the arms of members of a far-right fascist groups here in England. It's a variation on some Nazi symbolism."

"Just young people's silly artwork then like the Che shirts?" She shook her head in the negative. "Serious English groups?"

"Yes, but using a lot of ideas and symbolism with German origins. You might want to study the victim's history. Of course, the tat might not have anything to do with why he was topped, and he might have only been dragged into one of those groups as a lad basically against his will."

"Okay, we'll research his background. Could be a reason for his death. So, the blow was delivered by an attacker or attackers, making it a murder case?"

"Yes, most definitely. No way he could do that much damage to himself, even if he'd purposely fallen backwards on the sidewalk."

"We're still trying to figure out how he got to the playground. I understand he has bad arthritis in his knees." *Probably my future.*

"He still could have walked there. Like I said, that old man was in good shape despite some age-related arthritis, so he probably got some good daily exercise for a wrinkle. Knowing his background and lifestyle might help piece things together, but that's your problem, not mine."

"Why did you recognize the tat?"

"Long story. Invite me to a pub dinner sometime and I'll tell it to you."

As Matt left the morgue, he thought about what Dr. Bridges's tale could possibly be. Everyone had baggage. Few people lacked problems and traumas in their lives, and even a complete lack of them was also bad baggage because experiencing a few winnowed out the weak and made the strong even stronger. *In your opinion, Mr. Cooper. Your psychiatric skills don't go much beyond that, and your self-analysis is too often flawed.*

Dr. Bridges knew Inspector Cooper was a conflicted man. She was plugged into the gossip mill as well as most plods in the constabulary's area and knew that most coppers thought Matt Cooper had been treated badly by police VIPS. Usually at his level, politics didn't have that

much of an effect, but she knew the current commissioner preferred arse-kissers to independent thinkers who decided on their own to do what was right even if the VIPs didn't approve of it.

Above Cooper's level, political expediency often trumped good policing policy. Many people just shrugged that off as the way of the world. The English had invented political intrigue, after all, and taught all their subjects, UK citizens or otherwise, even those in their colonies, that was how it had to be. In the twenty-first century, though, there were people who didn't accept that and the existence of the parasitic British royalty, and Lynne was one of them, although she mostly kept her ideas to herself.

If anyone believed the lies the VIPs propagated about Matt Cooper, they might change their mind quickly upon meeting him. Without ever hearing the words, she knew he would say that the police existed to serve and protect citizens, not the damned politicians. He would surely describe MI5 and NCA's roles in the same way. How did she know this? By his expression when he was talking about the victim. He wouldn't shirk on investigating the man's background, but his first knee-jerk assumption was that Chester Trent was indeed a victim who hadn't deserved to die that way.

She hoped that he would invite her to dinner some time. She wanted to learn more about this man who differed so much from his baby sister. Her luck with the weaker sex—and she considered most men weaker than women, at least in spirit—hadn't been that great. She was searching for Mr. Right, driven by the same concern for the human condition as Cooper, and every bloke she'd met had been found lacking in some way. That didn't mean that Mr. Right didn't exist, and, even if he didn't, one would think there should be a close approximation somewhere in the UK. That was her sleuthing responsibility: Find an approximation for Mr. Right who could become a trusted companion in life. She'd give Cooper a chance, no matter what the police VIPs thought about him. *Or maybe because of what they thought about him?*

Chapter Three

The Investigation Begins

Matt's new team began to probe into the victim's history. While a motive for murder wasn't required for the Crown Court, discovering it would help to focus their investigation. He expected Alan and other police VIPs to whine soon about funding and personnel, but the case was the most important one the team had to consider now, mostly because murders weren't that common, as Alan had admitted.

Yes, there'd been a few cases of manslaughter, basically beatings where some bloopers' brawl or domestic disputes had gone too far, but the new murder case, while possibly only second degree in the sense that it hadn't been planned, was clearly intentional.

They were literally turning over every stone in that playground because they needed evidence; moreover, almost any sizeable round rock could be the murder weapon! A weapon carried there by an attacker who'd followed Chester would make it first-degree murder, of course.

Satisfied that his team members were busy at their computers and calling on other stations, NCA, MI5, and Interpol about Chester Trent, with even the victim's name in some doubt, Matt, to do something additional beyond directing the orchestra of that investigative symphony, returned to see the neighbor with DS Sam Trout to ask if she knew anything about Chester's past.

"Kept himself to himself, he did," said Arlene Dunham, lowering her spectacles to give the eye to the two detectives.

Poor hen needs bifocals, Matt thought, doing his best to overlook her annoying habit. "Did you know anything about his background, though, even from other sources? We realize he only moved here two years ago, but his arrival might have led to some comments."

"From neighborhood gossips, you mean?" He gave a nod of encouragement. She smiled and thought a moment. "Two years? That's about right, I suppose." She made a sad face. "He showed up a month after I lost my George then; the big C took him." She frowned now at the two officers. "Mr. Trent was a bit too old for much socializing, I dare say. Didn't even introduce me to his son when he came to visit."

Sam grasped at that. "So, the son visited him here?"

"Carbon copy of the father in manners and maybe looks if you allow for differences in age. Chester didn't talk that much, and his son even less. Of course, maybe the military had just trained him to keep his mouth shut."

"So, was he in a uniform like in the picture?" Matt asked. He assumed she was referring to the son and not the father.

"That picture was taken by me, Inspector, during that visit. But he also had a driver who was in uniform. Maybe the son's some important military VIP? A general or sumpin'? That should be easy for you plods to figure out."

"We're working on it, Mrs. Dunham," Matt said, "but I can't see any of that providing us a motive for someone to top Chester."

"You never know what them damned Russians might do, now do you? Old man Putin even sends his assassins into our country to kill people who fled his brutal regime. Maybe threatened the son by going after the father, for example. In any case, I'd be surprised if I shared more than a few dozen words with Chester after he arrived in our neighborhood. The son even less. The most was when Chester brought me a copy of his house key, giving a speech long for

him to ask me the favor to check on things if he weren't around, including letting people in the house whom I trusted. Couldn't imagine who that might be besides the police at the time—I hadn't even known he had a son—but lucky for you plods that I trusted you...more or less. 'Twas strange behavior on his part: Like maybe he thought sumpin' could happen to him, you know?"

"Anyone come around to visit Chester besides his son?"

"Our vicar visited once. Caught him afterwards 'cause I was outside gardening. He said Chester was ill. Now there's a person you might want to talk to, a huge gossip."

"The vicar?"

"Nae, officer. The vicar's wife! Biggest gossip around these parts. Henrietta can tell you when the Pope's under the weather, what exactly ails the old fellow, and what's the color of his mucus. And our church has no love for that pontiff, I dare say. Um, maybe that's why. In any case, if anyone knows anything about old Chester besides that son, she'd be the person."

In agreement with Mrs. Dunham, Matt decided that might be an Anglican attack against Catholics, not exactly appropriate if the vicar could want to appear to be an ecumenical leader. He glanced at Sam who nodded in agreement that they were finished.

"Um, thank you, Mrs. Dunham, for talking with us. If you can think of anything else that might be useful in our investigation, please give us a call."

They handed her their cards and left.

"I forgot to ask her for the vicar's address," Matt said as they pulled away from the curb.

"We passed the church and the vicarage on the way here, Guv. I assume you want to pay this Henrietta a wee visit," Matt nodded. "Might as well since it's near." He laughed. "Her gossiping skills certainly come highly recommended."

"Right." Matt then thought of Chester's tat. "Are far-right blokes devout?"

"Only in America among those crazy Evangelists. Most Anglicans here just go through the motions like everyone else, out of habit. Even Catholics do that in the UK. All just ritual, I dare say. I have no idea where Chester's religious proclivities were, but the vicar visited him, so Chester was either playing the game like Henry the Eighth or just receiving the nearest holy man as a visiting comforter to prepare him for the long sleep."

"Seems like you're at least an agnostic."

"I just go through the motions too."

"Mrs. Dunham seemed to assume Chester was Anglican. We'll see."

The vicar's wife, Mrs. Henrietta Rutherford, treated them to tea and freshly baked biscuits. Both were evidence of social graces she'd learned over the years to support her husband's shepherding of his parishioners as he moved from flock to flock until he had settled into his own church. If one could judge from the outside of the church building and the outside and inside of the vicarage, his current congregation wasn't poor, which meant they numbered and earned far more than what one might expect from Mrs. Dunham and Mr. Trent's small enclave.

"At first, Chester used to walk to attend my husband's services, but he ended that habit after a few years. Our church here became a bit too far for him to walk, to put a fine point on it. We have a TV service for our older people for that very reason. Local channel, of course. I don't know if he ever used it."

Maybe not that much of a gossip, Matt thought. "Do you know anything about his past life before coming here?"

She didn't, so she continued with the same theme. "At first, he attended some of our social events as well, although I think he only did that for the free food, and he'd have a chinwag with me or Adam sometimes. I learned he'd lost his wife years ago, and he had a son in the armed forces. He was either very shy or didn't like people all that much, but a lot of old people become like that. I think he's from Maltby originally. I believe Adam told me that."

Because you asked? Matt thought. He was sure that Catholics would consider those confidences covered by priest-parishioner rules of engagement, supposedly more rigorous than attorney-client privilege, but he wasn't sure about Anglicans. If Henry the Eighth hadn't wanted a divorce, though, they'd be Catholic as well.

"That might help us, Mrs. Rutherford. I might send one of my officers to talk to the vicar later."

"Oh, he can't add anything I don't already know."

You might be surprised.

They had the card ceremony again, and the two officers left the vicarage, having enjoyed the tea and biscuits but little else.

Once in the car, Matt said to Sam, "When we get back to the station, I'm going to have Claire create a more formal team to track our victim's history. I have a hunch he didn't come from Maltby. There might be a good reason for him to be antisocial, in fact."

"Sounds like a plan, Guv."

"Just Matt, please, when we're alone together like now. I'm Matt; you're Sam. Okay?"

"Fine by me. Chester doesn't have form, Matt. Claire won't have an easy task."

"It doesn't seem that he was bothering anyone here, but there must be something in his past that pissed someone off. A bloke doesn't go off and top an eighty-year-old just for sport."

"I don't know, Matt. I remember a case where an old devil in a pub called a young tippler a hothead, who then started proving the old devil was right. Nary a swear word in their entire conversation."

"And that's why society will always need coppers, Sam."

Chapter Four

Querying the Military

The Defense Ministry forced them to find their way through a rat's maze of bureaucratic channels. In the process, they learned that Chester's son was named Arnold; he was a major, but it wasn't at all clear what he actually did, only that it was secret, because everyone refused to tell them. The father was a mystery man; so was the son. And why was the government so insistent about giving them a run-around?

"They're hiding something," DC Dewi Owen, a young Welshman, opined during a late afternoon briefing session.

"You think?" DC Claire Walker countered.

"Let's not waste any time discussing it more," Matt said. "Let Alan handle those MoD blokes from now on. The son's tasks performed for His Majesty are most likely irrelevant to our investigation. I just want to ask Arnold about his father's past. Someone obviously had it in for the old man."

They debated this and that for a bit until Matt called it a day. His first murder case was going nowhere fast. He needed a respite from it, so he called Lynne Bridges, offering to take her out to that pub dinner. He picked her up at seven and they walked into *The Blue Duck* pub together.

"How'd you learn about this place? It's wonderful. It hasn't become an American-style sports bar!"

"I asked my DCI for a recommendation. Alan MacDonald's more of a traditionalist like me, and you, apparently. I don't like four different telly screens showing a variety of current or past sporting events. Say, we're lucky. There's an empty cubby over there towards the back."

After receiving their drinks and examining their menus a bit, Matt watched as Lynne spent a bit more time perusing the pub's offerings. There was a trace of freckles along a swath from ear to ear that passed over the middle of her button nose; in her youth, they might have been more pronounced. The sparkling blue eyes seemed to say that here was a woman who enjoyed life and would resist anyone who tried to stop that from occurring; those eyes were wide and intelligent, so he knew that she'd hold her own in an argument. *An interesting woman, to say the least*, he thought.

"So, what about the tat?"

Lynne eyed him warily. "Not tonight. I just need to relax."

Matt shrugged. "Might help with our investigation."

"Maybe. Maybe not. What have you found out about Chester Trent?"

"He has a son in the military, and the Defense Ministry is being cagey about what he does for the UK's defense efforts. All we know is that both father and son use the name Trent, Chester, and Arnold, respectively. We don't even know where either of them was born."

"Interesting. If the son's in the military, he'll be vetted; and if his father has some sordid history, that vetting might have affected the son's service."

"We must dance around military bureaucracy. That doesn't—"

"Hold that thought. Here's the waiter."

They both settled on meat pies and splitting a tossed salad, the first the waiter's recommendation. After he left, Matt said, "We probably shouldn't talk about work. Neither one of us will enjoy the meal and relax otherwise."

"Good suggestion. Here are our salads." After taking a few bites, she stabbed a recalcitrant cherry tomato and said, "How are you adapting to the Rother Valley?"

"Still waiting for my furniture. I don't have a lot, so they're probably just throwing it on some lorry mostly full of someone else's stuff. I'm using a sleeping bag for now."

She smiled. "Like a Boy Scout or twitcher, I dare say. Too bad it's not summertime. You could do that better in the Peak District National Park."

He shrugged. "I have done that in the park. It now would be a much longer commute, though, even if you ignore the bad weather. Where do you live?"

"Near Swinton. While I can ride my bicycle on good-weather days if I have the time, I usually drive. I suppose you lived in Sheffield center before?"

"Had a nice flat not far from work, but it would also be too far away now. I'll be fine where I'm at once I get my things and find the establishments I need to survive as an unmarried plod. Especially places for takeaway."

"You'll remember this meal as a special treat then."

"Pubs are more numerous than fleas on a dog. Enjoying a meal with a charming lady is the special treat."

She blushed. "Do you consider this a date?"

"I'm no pimpled pubescent, hen, but I really value the opportunity. 'Tis a special treat, even if you won't tell me about the tat."

"I decided it's too personal and won't help your investigation. Perhaps the son will clear up everything."

There was a lull in their conversation as they decided on their dessert orders. Matt's ringtone sounded, the Mozart excerpt much too loud until he reduced the mobile's volume. He looked at the name in the tiny screen.

"Sorry. I have to take this." There followed mostly a mix of ayes and nays, and then he said, "Okay, do it tomorrow morning." He smiled at Lynne. "Sorry for the interruption. The troops are still a bit on tiptoes with their new DI and want to please him. I guess I'd do the same in their place."

"I can be a detective too, even with the slim evidence provided by one side of that conversation. One, your ringtone is evidence for an interest in classical music, Mozart at least. Two, you're a good leader who worries about the *esprit de corps* of your team, if only because you're the new bloke at the station. That's something I'd find hard to do. I'm used to working alone."

"You have an assistant."

"Who's also a friend."

"Is he my competition?" Matt said with a wink and a smile.

"Would it matter?"

"I'd maybe have to up my game."

Her smile was genuine. "Don't worry. Ralph's gay. He and his partner are fostering a little girl and boy, hoping to adopt them eventually."

"That's me putting my foot in my mouth. And good for them." He thought a moment. "Do you like classical music?" She nodded. "There are musical shows, concerts, and recitals in

and around the Sheffield conurbation. May I be so forward during this early social meeting of minds to ask if the lady might want to attend a function like that with me?"

"Yes, I'd love to do that. I used to take Mum quite often."

He nodded. "What's her prognosis?"

"She's slowing down and needs a walker. My only consolation is that she doesn't know how bad it is. And that she's well taken care of by a home health aide. Do you have family?"

"Both parents deceased. And there's little love between my baby sister and me."

"I guess Kath has recovered from her own problems?" Kath's new boyfriend had dumped her recently.

"Um, you obviously know her because she's a SOCO. And well enough to call her Kath."

"Better than you think. She asked me for advice once."

"About her pregnancy?" Matt said with a frown. "Her previous jerk of a boyfriend expected her to provide the condoms!"

"And wanted to abandon her when she needed an abortion."

"The doctor said the baby was dead and waiting might kill Kath. All her church and her priest, of course, advised against an abortion. They were like those Americans living in the Middle Ages who wanted to make all abortions illegal in the US. I told her to forget about what they said and follow the gynecologist's recommendation. I don't think she trusted my opinion, though. I became an agnostic long ago."

"Which is probably why she came to me. I told her the same thing. In her case—dead baby and the mother in danger—there was absolutely no question. I've talked to her a lot since then. She doesn't regret that decision, Matt."

"Good. I certainly don't. I think she avoided an early funeral, to be honest."

"Um, no one's immortal, but dying young when you don't have to do so would be an absolute tragedy."

"And maybe more of a sin, being essentially suicide? Quirks of fate. One can live to be a hundred or get killed crossing the street by a lorry moving at twenty clicks per. *Carpe diem*, I say."

She frowned at him. "Especially in your occupation, Inspector Cooper."

"Ouch. I suppose I deserved that. And, as a *mea culpa*, I'm going for the rice pudding. They say rice is low fodmap, correct?"

"Almost all kinds. The vanilla won't kill you either, but the cream and sugar might."

"I'll chance it. What are you having?"

She smiled. "Strawberry shortcake. I live dangerously."

"And probably get a lot more exercise than I do. Coffee?"

"Let's try it. Good coffee's hard to find in England. Maybe we'll be surprised."

Rather than take her back to her car parked at the morgue, Matt drove her home, promising to pick her up the next morning. It would be too cold to bike it.

She leaned over, turned his face towards her, and kissed him. "That's for a wonderful evening, Inspector Cooper."

"You made it so, Dr. Bridges. Hopefully there will be some encores?"

"More likely than not, but we'll see. I believe we're both discriminating adults about whom we choose for our friends. Or lovers."

He watched her rush through the cold into the lobby of her building. *Damn, that was some kiss!*

Chapter Five

Some Near Misses

As he traveled towards his own flat after leaving Lynne at hers, Matt had to take his road that was a spoke off a rotary. He was about to take advantage of the straight shot when he had to slam on the brakes. A woman collapsed only feet in front of his car. He put on his hazard lights and went to help her.

In the harsh beams of his headlights, her body was mostly two-toned: pale white and bright red. He made a quick inspection without moving her: She'd taken a beating but was still alive. Her breathing was steady. There didn't seem to be anything major wrong with her, but he wasn't a doctor who could decide that.

He phoned for an ambulance. After it arrived and the EMTs confirmed the poor woman was stable, he followed them to the hospital.

"She'll live," the A&E attending said to him after he'd made the call to send two of his DCs to the victim's house, and the doctor had returned to the A&E's reception area. "Kudos for bringing her right to us. All quiet here? Unusual for a Friday night."

Matt nodded, eying his phone. "Just waiting to hear from some of my DCs and a few AROs to tell me if they've caught the husband."

"Maybe the wanker saw the blues or heard the twos and decided to scarper. We had a bloke here last Friday with a knife wound and concussion caused by his girlfriend's kitchen utensil and a frying pan, respectively. Not that the bastard didn't deserve it, to be honest, but still unnecessary violence. She should have just called the police."

Matt smiled. Sometimes people who were with a plod talked like a plod. And sometimes waiting for police could mean a death sentence.

At that moment, the A&E's doors swung open with a crash, revealing a large and wild man wielding a kitchen knife. "Where is she? Where's my wife? I'll kill her!"

Matt glanced at the doctor, made a phoning gesture with his hand, and then stepped towards the intruder with palms up. "Sir, you'll have to leave the hospital. Visiting hours are over."

The rabid arse waved his knife. "Get out of my way, boy! I have to find my wife and give her more of what she deserves!"

"If she's here, come back during visitors' hours tomorrow." Matt glanced at his watch. "Rather, later today."

"You're filth, aren't you? I can tell. Are you protecting the bitch? I'll turn you into bloody filets as well."

"I don't think so. You're so angry and high on drugs that you can't even walk straight. Give me the knife sir."

"Oh, I'll give it to you, all right!" He lunged at Matt, making a stabbing motion.

It wasn't hard for Matt to dodge that first thrust, but he knew he couldn't keep doing it forever. The eejit with his system loaded with a cocktail of drugs—maybe coke and meth?—would be riding high on it for a while, and Matt had already been exhausted after a full day's work and the date with Lynne, although the latter had been relaxing.

He needed some type of weapon. He pushed a heavy pushcart laden with supplies already to tend to the needs of new A&E patients into the wanker who was so slowed by his condition

that he couldn't dodge it. It crashed into him, the top level hitting his midsection and the bottom his knees. He acted as though he didn't even feel it, though.

Matt then spotted some heavy bedpans stacked on a wooden table. He threw them like frisbees at the wild man. One caught him in the mouth, making him even wilder and causing him to spew bloody spit and a few teeth as he roared.

Matt finished him off with an old heavy-iron IV pole that might also have been destined for a storage closet; he wielded it like a patrolman's baton, first knocking the knife from the attacker's hand with a bone-crunching blow to the wrist and then smashing it against the side of his head.

He was cuffing the abusing husband and stating the approved CPS caution when the AROs showed up.

"What took you so long?" Matt said.

The doctor approached Matt and the police's prisoner. "My report will say that he broke or dented everything in his rage," he told Matt with a smile.

Matt smiled, nodded his thanks to the doctor, and then turned to the lead ARO. "Get someone to bag that knife for evidence. It was probably also used in a domestic abuse case. Attempted murder and a violent attack on a police officer will be enough charges for now. We'll probably come up with a few more." He waved a hand around to indicate the A&E reception area. "Terrorist attack on an official government institution and its healthcare employees maybe." He started to walk down the hall.

"Where are you off to?" the doctor said.

"I'm going to leave a note for the wife telling her her arse of a husband is in police custody and will be in the gaol for a few years for what he's done. She doesn't even need to be a witness. I was present for most of it."

He nodded. "I'll go with you."

As the duo walked along the silent corridor, Matt's adrenalin surged a bit again. In his mind he was reliving the confrontation, seeing with satisfaction how the blow on his assailant's arm had dislodged the knife. He would have to confirm—fog of war and all that—but the tattoo on that arm was like the one that had been on Chester Trent's!

After leaving the note for the ward nurse to give to the patient, coffee time was interrupted because the doctor had to leave to check on another patient before he could brew a new pot of coffee. Matt sat in the A&E's small canteen and waited for him to return.

He was in no hurry to leave. He needed to decompress a bit from the violent altercation with the victim's husband, and the corresponding report about the whole incident could wait until the next day. And he only had an empty and lonely flat awaiting him in any case.

His delay, though, gave him time to ponder just how pleasant his date with Lynne had been. He had to wonder if, as he aged, whether he could make that radical switch from a relatively pleasant if rare encounter with an interesting bird, despite the circumstances associated with his rushed trip to the A&E to save the victim, to the adrenalized encounter with the victim's husband. *Would that be a motivation for pursuing promotion?* He might have to wait for the current commissioner to die to get it! And develop more of a taste for boring paperwork?

He also wondered what Lynne would think about the violent encounter that night. He'd had no choice but to act, but he'd used his skills and quick thinking to become more violent than

his attacker. *And he had a knife!* He might have been stabbed in the back if he'd tried to run! Or the doctor would have been attacked?

Each of them, pathologist and copper, had to deal with society's violence in their own way. Hers might be considered the worse job. A multicar collision on the motorway would often bring victims of road violence into her domain, mangled bodies that a copper would never see. Extreme violence in police cases was generally less common and subtle than a lot of the everyday stuff Lynne would have to face, especially cases outside his team's domain. *And do I want to discuss any of this with a woman that I find attractive, interesting, and intelligent?*

SAMPLE

Chapter Six

The Visitors from MI5

Matt had arrived at the scene of another crime—a suspected arson had turned out to be a meth lab explosion—when the station received visitors from MI5. Claire was there to receive them, though, and later informed him about the meeting.

The idea for the change from arson to meth lab explosion came from Daffy. The crime scene might have given them the same verdict, but a reliable eye-witness account had set the stage.

The urchin and sometime snout had approached Matt and said, “Inspector, love of my life, there’s more to this crime scene than meets the eye.” Daffy had gone on to explain that it was a meth lab and more: The wankers who were the CEO and CFO were always dressed in camo.

After figuring out what she meant—Delphinia Bednarik aka Daffy was a Czech orphan whose immigrant parents had died making meth, and her mastery of English rudimentary at the best of times—he had to wonder, as he always did, if she was just looking for her next meal. Her information was usually reliable, though, so he translated CEO and CFO to “gang leaders.”

He waved two bills at her. “For your dosh if you have an idea who they are.”

She snatched the bills, stuffed them in her cleavage, and laughed at him. “Who they aren’t maybe? Despite camos, not soldiers, I’m guessing. I seen better garb on the used-clothes tables at rummage sales. Didn’t fit them fat pillocks very well either. Last names I don’t ‘ave, though. Just Mike and Steve.”

“Any distinguishing features?”

“Besides being ugly fascists with smallpox scars?” He nodded. “Once I seen them in muscle shirts trying to get it on with some kerb-crawlers.” She tapped her left shoulder below where a bra strap should be. “Tats here like me nana used to warn me about. Nazi tats!”

It’s an invasion, Matt thought with a smile. He gave her another bill. “Don’t spend it all in one place.”

“No worry. And when are you going to make me an honest woman, Inspector Cooper? Get rid of that pathologist slut and let’s get it on!”

He smiled at her frequent criticism. “She’s more my age, Daffy. You’re under-age.”

She frowned and thrust out her chest. “These say otherwise. I can beat hers any day. Your doctor’s a bit flat-chested, I dare say.”

Matt gave a wave and returned to his crime scene.

He’d tried several times to help Daffy. She had no bad habits as far as he knew beyond loving her freedom as a street urchin, and she was a good observer of the Sheffield area’s underbelly. Had she followed him to Wath?

But in his opinion, her life seemed as full of danger as being on drugs or practicing the world’s oldest trade. She was a free spirit, like a feral cat or dog, who wanted an unfettered life. He wondered if that “pathologist slut” could talk some sense into her. Until then, the most he could do was to help keep her alive, free of disease, and nourished. That was a tall order because she was always the one who found him. If anyone asked, Lynne for example, he had no idea how or where to find the girl.

The men from MI5 weren't regular agents. Hal Leonard was an American consultant working with MI5 to end illegal arms trafficking in the UK. That had been one of his specialties as an Interpol agent, but he'd resigned from that international police force for some reason. Matt suspected it was to be more relevant. Claire suspected a woman might be the reason. He smiled when he heard that; Claire was a good detective, but like Matt, Hal was an older bloke who seemed to be a confirmed bachelor.

The second agent was European, Dutch to be specific. Claire observed that he could be the twin of David Suchet, the actor who'd played Christie's Hercule Poirot so often. While Matt knew who Poirot was as a fictional character—he'd read Christie as a child—he had no idea who the actor was; he rarely watched the telly. Bastiann van Coevorden was also an ex-Interpol agent. *Maybe their countries' loss and the UK's gain?* thought Matt.

The two MI5 agents couldn't be more different. Hal looked like a scruffy American tourist in his Hawaiian shirt, khakis, and trainers; Bastiann looked like he could be one of the King's butlers with his mutton chops, handle-bar moustache, and his impeccable three-piece suit. Hal was the younger man, and Matt could tell he'd impressed Claire. She thought he wasn't married and more a carefree bachelor despite the hints about the girlfriend, but van Coevorden was married to an ex-Scotland Yard Inspector who'd worked in the Art and Antiques Division and now owned her own art gallery.

One detail from the meeting Claire related interested Matt more: The victim's husband Matt had set up for an extended stay in the King's boarding house was an arms trafficker, hence Hal's interest (apparently Bastiann was just there so they couldn't gang up on Hal). While not having America's love affair with deadly weapons, the UK and Europe still provided many clients for illegal arms, making arms trafficking a profitable business.

The woman Matt had taken to A&E had married a psychotic sociopath who was in a business that encouraged violent behavior. But did MI5 know about that scrote and Chester Trent's similar tattoos? Would they even care?

The MI5 agents had taken more information away from the meeting than they offered to share. Matt thought that might be typical. His fallback would have to be Major Trent.

They'd divulged a few nuggets of information, though: One was a list of reasons about why the irate husband operated in the Sheffield area. The first was that the area was used as a distribution center. Hal had said the arms and munitions would come in from the east and west ports to be stored in area warehouses and later distributed to buyers. He could only offer a few examples, so that observation seemed like a dangerous extrapolation even though it made perfect sense. Some of his examples included warehouses also used for the distribution of drugs, so NCA agents were involved in Hal's task force: The clients included organized crime as well as paramilitary groups.

All that was beyond Matt's purview. He had a murder to solve. But the information provided implied that Chester's murder case had become more complicated. And he had to wonder how the traffickers could even operate without involving some people in high places, greedy bastards who didn't mind looking the other way to rake in a lot of money.

Chapter Seven

Major Trent

"I took a beating when I had to run the military's gantlet," Alan informed Matt.

Matt smiled. "Do you want to tell me about the hoops you had to jump through?"

Alan shrugged. "And here I thought MI5 and NCA were bad! I had to call in a few favors with police VIPs as well. That'll surely come back to haunt me. To make a long story short, Major Trent, Chester's son, is a liaison between MI5, NCA, and the military. That means the poor bastard must attend boring meetings in the Home Office and both those organizations' offices and never discuss what they're about. He not only has a chauffeur, he has a security detail. They would have been around watching when he visited his father."

"And what can we learn about why someone would murder the father from all that?" Matt hadn't forgotten about the tattoos, but Alan probably had more complete information to offer.

"Nothing yet, until you talk to the prat. We can reimburse you for train tickets to London, but try not to stay overnight. It might be more difficult to cover your expenses in that case, especially with the price of a decent hotel in the Old Smoke."

"A phone call wouldn't suffice? We have encryption, they have encryption, everyone has encryption."

Alan laughed. "Sounds like some silly rock song, something the Yanks might cook up." He shook his head. "I managed to make an appointment for you. It's better to grill Arnold Trent about his father face to face. Those military lads are usually stone-faced SOBs, but you can react to what he says and maybe observe a bit of useful body language if you personally visit. Just make sure your team has enough to keep them busy. Anything I can do in that regard while you're in London?"

"After last night, they have a serious domestic case they need to prepare for the CPS." Matt explained, the explanation accompanied by Alan's grimaces. "And there might be a connection to Chester Trent because the yob has a similar tattoo." After that bit of news, Matt continued with the discussion about his visit to London. "Just don't let the Commissioner get scent of my trip. He'd at least make me pay for the tickets, I dare say, not to mention going after you, sir."

Alan smiled. "With his huge proboscis, that might be hard to achieve, but I'll do my best. What about the team?"

"You mean for other aspects of the murder investigation?" Alan nodded. "Early days. We're still learning about the victim, hoping to find something in his past that shows motive for the killer and focuses further investigations. Otherwise, we have plenty to do. If nothing happens in a few days, I'd be inclined to ratchet down and focus on other pending cases if it's okay with you."

"Um, that's supposed to be my line, complaining about wasting funding and personnel. But I have a gut feeling that Chester Trent had a secret life once upon a time, don't you?"

"Aye. Otherwise, his murder doesn't make much sense, does it? There was nothing to rob in his house beyond an old flip phone that had been left uncharged. No paperwork. Not a damned thing of note, to be honest."

"Hopefully the son will provide some clues. I don't like cold cases."

"Me neither, sir."

While the case of the old man's murder was a frustrating one, it was also a distraction from other more conventional cases that needed Matt's team's attention. A bank robbery, for example, was both a bit more typical but also a bit unusual. That contradictory description came from the fact that it seemed to be a one-time event and the work of a gang and not part of a small series of heists in their area made by one or two addicts desperate for drugs money...

Matt had looked around the small bank's lobby after the SOCOs let Dewi and him in. Lynne was just zipping up the body bag.

"Twenty-five- to thirty-five-year-old female victim, Inspector Cooper. Bullet right through the heart. Didn't have a chance."

He crouched and unzipped the bag enough to reveal the woman's face. He snapped a picture with his phone. "COD and TOD are obvious, Doctor. Intentional or accidental?"

"Difficult to determine."

He stood, nodded, and glanced at Dewi, who examining the purse with latex gloves on. He shook his head in the negative. "No ID," Matt said, translating the DC's shrug for Lynne. "Please do a tox screen when you get her on your table."

"You're thinking she's not just a customer, aren't you?"

"No ID, no check to deposit so no deposit slip, no papers at all," Dewi said. "My mum has tons more in her purse."

Dewi was from a huge Welsh matriarchal clan that Matt frankly envied. "And your mum would call one of her golden boys to do her banking for her now."

Besides his DC, there were his brothers: A vicar, a firefighter, and a bloke who dressed in sixteenth-century garb to welcome VIP visitors to Sheffield's Town Hall by pounding his staff and announcing their presence to the Lord Mayor. Matt hadn't met any of them, but Dewi's description of his family's get-togethers always sounded like being at a rock star's publicity events for his fans but without the rock star in attendance.

Matt nodded slightly towards an older gentleman with old-fashioned hexagonal lenses, one of them now cracked albeit still in the frame; he had his striped suit coat laid across his knees. An EMT was attending to a gash in the poor man's forehead. "I assume that bloke's the manager?" Matt asked the top who'd escorted them into the bank. He was still standing at attention even though the uniformed constable had removed his hard helmet.

"Right you are, Guv. I dinnae get his name, though. I dinnae bank here. Sorry."

"You were doing your job outside, Constable. But as the guardian of this neighborhood who must know it so well, I'm happy you confirmed my guess. We're all on the same team."

Matt walked towards the manager. *Perhaps he knows the female victim?*

Matt had never liked London. Like most big cities, it had attractions and charm if one knew where to find them, but "big" always meant far too many people. And there was always a significant percentage of them who were scurrilous yobs, among them some politicians and other government bureaucrats. The latter two groups, led by some incompetent PMs, had steadily become worse in their problem-solving skills and cared nothing about that lack from the time of the Iron Lady forward. To think that policing, even with the reforms of 2013 that had added even more bureaucracy by creating the NCA to join MI5 and MI6 as government agencies that made most local coppers' lives more difficult, could ever maintain order amidst the chaos, especially with budget and personnel cuts, and Matt thought that meant that most politicians were simply mad and should be institutionalized.

He liked trains, though. Ever since he was a wee lad, he'd loved to ride them. No model train sets for him; he had to ride the real ones. As an older teen, he'd spent an entire summer traveling around Europe, sleeping on them mostly to avoid the cost of hotels, but also in a few hostels. He wondered if Lynne would ever want to do that. He'd now be willing to add a few more creature comforts, of course—they weren't getting any younger and certainly weren't pimply teens. Maybe a few nice hotels now and then with full breakfast service?

He knew where to go from Kings Cross, smiled in the station upon seeing some tourists trying to find track 9¾, and walked into the lobby of the building the government had rented for some of its military's bureaucrats. The bureaucracy had outgrown the MoD's main building aka Whitehall, not far from Parliament, a common enough situation in the UK in the 21st century. Even with its ten floors above ground and two below, more room was required.

In the lobby, he showed his warrant card to one of the receptionists. "I'm Detective Inspector Matthew Cooper from the Sheffield Police Constabulary. I have an appointment to see Major Arnold Trent."

There was the frantic flurry of fast fingers as the receptionist consulted the major's appointment calendar on her decade-old computer.

"You're early," she told him. She pointed to a row of chairs where other abused prats were patiently waiting. "Sit over there. Someone will come down to fetch you, sir."

That someone turned out to be taller than he was even with her sensible heels. Women often said that men looked good in uniform. Matt thought this woman looked spectacular in one, but she was far too serious: No smile for him from that stone face, and no handshake.

"Are you Inspector Cooper?"

"Aye, guilty as charged."

"Follow me, sir."

Again, no smile, no please, basically just an order, as if every civilian's duty was to serve the King's military bureaucracy.

Still a bit stiff from his train and taxi rides, following her wasn't as easy as one might expect. He had to hustle to keep up. He focused on her shapely legs, her stylish shoes clicking on the polished and faded tiles of the reception lobby as they made their way to the three lifts.

He noted that Trent's office was on the fourth floor when she punched in the number.

"Don't I have to sign in or something?"

She glanced at him, her expression seeming to accuse him of being a dolt. "You must sign some documents after exiting the lift. We will also photocopy your warrant card and confirm its authenticity."

Upon exiting the lift, he noted the empty chair behind a small desk. *Does she sit there all day?*

"Any recommendations for a good but reasonably priced restaurant if our meeting lasts too long?"

"It won't. We have a half-hour scheduled for you, Inspector. You'll be on your way home soon enough."

"And if I wanted to stay in London and catch a musical show?"

"There's nothing worth seeing now, I dare say, and you'll still only have a half hour."

"And if I were to invite you to dinner and a show?"

"Sign these papers," she said, ignoring the last and giving him a pile of papers to sign.

He had to do that standing up, and because she remained standing, he read every document he signed to maximize her annoyance. When his torturing her was complete and she'd

copied his warrant card, she led him into an empty room that looked like a cleaner version of one of Wath station's interrogation rooms; it contained an old wooden table with an old wooden chair on each side.

"Wait here for the major. If you need to use the facilities, I must accompany you."

"Must be unisex then," he said with a smile.

"I'd be waiting outside, Inspector."

She shut the door as she left. He opened it once, only to see Trent's aide turn in her chair to glare at him, so Matt closed it again, wondering if her loo offer was even valid. He had to wonder also if the broomstick she had up her spine had grown along with her body, which was a rather nice one, all things considered, or if the factory had replaced it in the android-like receptionist every year she was operational.

There was a knock on the door as if the NHS doctor he'd met the night before was coming to give him a prostate test. Major Trent almost looked the part. He shook Matt's hand, though, and sat down opposite him, back to the door. *To make a quick dart if needs be?*

"What do you need to know about my father? No questions about me, please."

"Anything that might help us find his murderer."

"Because you don't know who the killer is, and I don't either, I'm at a loss for words. Are you sure there was a killer? He was an old man. His neighbor said he'd fallen before and nearly broke his hip."

"I trust our pathologist. She's determined that the blunt force trauma he received couldn't have been an accident, Major."

He nodded. "I suppose I'll have to ID him and attend an inquest?"

"Probably no need for either. You don't even need to attend his funeral." Matt didn't even try to keep the disgust from his voice. *What a son!*

"He'll be cremated, of course, so I agree with you there. Who IDed him?"

"His neighbor. She also let us into his house."

"I bet your SOCOs found a lot there to keep them busy," the major said with a laugh.

The irony was wasted on Matt. "He lived simply, to say the least. Not a bad thing at his age. A lot of wrinklies become hoarders."

"Or misers like Ebenezer Scrooge, I dare say."

"Sounds like you didn't have a good relationship with your father?"

"He abandoned my mother and me when I was eight, Inspector. She was pregnant at the time and miscarried because of that, and we struggled for years. After she passed on, he showed up, expecting me to be the dutiful son and provide for him. I was responsible enough not to shirk that responsibility completely, but I couldn't possibly enjoy even the little I did, could I? Perhaps he got what he deserved."

"That's not for me to say, and maybe not for you either. Shall I conclude that there was a large span of years during which neither you nor your mother knew where he was or what he was doing?"

"I don't know about my mother, but that certainly applies to me. Moreover, I really didn't give a damn. And don't now, frankly. If I ever have children, I'll have to find another role model to follow, that's for certain."

"Was he even living in this country?"

"Why do you ask that?"

“Because of the tattoo on the back of his hand. It could show support for any far-right group from either the UK or some European country, given the times we live in now. Did he have the tat before he left your mother and you?”

“Um, I noticed that when I visited him that one time. I must apologize, Inspector. I wasn’t curious about what my father had been doing all those years, first, because I’m a very busy person, and second, because I said, I don’t give a rat’s arse about what he was doing. To answer your specific question, I can’t remember whether he had a tattoo when he pretended to be a normal father; we were afraid of him, you see.”

“Was Chester Trent his real name?”

The major thought a moment. “I suppose so. That’s the name on my birth certificate. But I repeat: I hardly knew the man. In particular, I don’t know what he was doing when I was young, and we pretended to be a normal family. That’s too long ago.”

“Yet you allowed some photographer to take that picture as if he were the doting father of a successful military man.”

“The neighbor lady shot that pic. He asked for a copy, so I enlarged it and gave him the photo as a gift, maybe thinking it would be one way of making amends, I don’t know.”

“So, there’s no chance that you know anyone who wanted to kill him?”

“Not even a reason for doing that because he was always so damn secretive.” Albert laughed. “Of course, there were times in my own darkest moments when I might have topped him myself. I hated that man most of my life.”

“But not at the end?”

“Even then, but knowing he would die soon mitigated the hate somewhat.”

“Did you buy him that house?”

“No. That’s something your team could pursue. Where did he get the money for that? Out of the blue, I received a telegram; he told me he wanted to see me. I visited him, more out of curiosity than any love I felt for the wrinklie. I saw that he was comfortable in that little pensioners’ enclave, so I tried to forget about the whole ordeal. I mean, he seemed to have some nice neighbors who’d take care of him. I suppose you plods will help them in that regard, if only to close his case.”

“Unfortunately, his death is more than suspicious. We plods don’t like people getting away with murder, even if the family wants nothing to do with the victim and thinks he deserved what he got.”

The major frowned. “I explained my reasons, Inspector. Will that be all?”

Matt handed young Trent his card. “If anything occurs to you that might help us in our investigation, please call me. Will your android accompany me to the lobby?”

That made the major smile. “She’s a bit hard to take, isn’t she? A fascist through and through, I’m guessing. Unfortunately, I must deal with some strange personalities in my work. Fortunately, my work provides a few escapes outside the MoD that make military life more tolerable. But, to answer your question, she’ll accompany you until you leave the building. The military rarely trusts civilians, even at the level of MPs.”

Matt winked. “Especially them, I’m guessing.”

Chapter Eight

Back to the Rother Valley

During the return train ride, Matt went over what he'd learned about Chester Trent from his son. The answer? Not much. He would have his team pursue the father's financial situation, particularly how he'd come by enough money to manage to purchase that little house.

That was one lead that could be useful. It might also tell them where he'd worked and whether it was legitimate employment or not. Or it might lead to some criminal gang or far-right organization who'd agreed to give the old man funds to buy his silence? There was a huge span of years when the old boy could have been up to no good.

Or maybe he'd just been a brilliant entrepreneur or day trader? The possibilities were endless, but he'd had enough money to live comfortably albeit modestly. And hide from someone who'd wanted the assurance that he wouldn't talk to the authorities? It happened.

By the time he briefed the main players on his team, he'd organized all that in his mind and told them about it. He then listened to them. Most policework could be reduced to tried and true methods of investigation, talking to family members, clergymen, and doctors; interviewing a victim's suppliers like grocers and chemists; looking at tax records; etc. Nothing about what Matt was told seemed of consequence beyond how he'd financed the purchase of his house. Even the idea that he'd grown up locally was incorrect: There was no record of him in any school in the Sheffield conurbation. Of course, at the time he would have been in school, only paper records existed, if that, so that information was sparse at best.

They discussed other pending cases as well, the bank robbery the most important.

"The victim at the bank has been involved in drugs trafficking since she was twelve," Dewi Owen informed the group. "Two of the four robbers are a brother and cousin." Dewi showed the team their pictures. "Maybe they needed some extra funding quickly for something? The thugs' business must work like the supermarkets off volume sales, but only after an initially large investment to set everything up with either the purchase of lots of product or investment in equipment to make and package it."

"And both the latter might be required," Alan said.

Matt knew the DCI was tiring of Dewi's Welsh accent and idioms and inability to get to the point. Matt decided to come to the DC's rescue.

"I believe she was only there to help watch out for prats wanting to be heroes. Is it possible they wanted the funds for expansion purposes? That's what I'm reading between the lines from both of you." He winked at Alan. "Equipment for a meth lab, perchance?"

"That would explain the one-off heist but not murdering Elaine," Dewi said.

"Dinnae keen why they did that," Alan agreed.

Matt shrugged. "Loose lips sink ships? Her own family's, to be precise. Or, she had second thoughts. She'd never gone to jail and perhaps had no desire to do so."

"Ask around," Alan told Dewi. "Some of the narco lads in the other larger stations might even have been using her as a snout, and the cousin or brother found out."

"But to kill your own flesh and blood?" Dewi said. "In the middle of a heist, no less?"

"Explains why the shooting doesn't look like an accident," Matt said. He nodded to Alan. "We'll keep working on it."

That effectively ended the meeting. The detectives and uniforms involved returned to their desks somewhat disappointed with their progress, and Matt walked to his office feeling the same way. Chester's case was like a mispers one, and, like those cases, their victim had been

able to get lost in the UK. If it weren't for his murder, he would have died, been cremated, and then forgotten like so many of the elderly, most people not even knowing that such a person had ever existed on the planet. The bank heist seemed a lot more concrete.

Matt tried to dispel those depressing thoughts by focusing first on his email and then on his in-box. The first contained a few "welcomes," but not from the Commissioner, of course. He smiled at the one from Lynne, sent before their pub date. There was one from Alan as well. And an important one from his movers: His furniture would be delayed yet another day. He would have done better leasing a van and moving himself! He didn't have that much to move, after all.

The in-box also contained a few more forms for him to fill out. One police form was to update his NHS and other insurance information. He did that, thinking of the brawl at the hospital that might have ended his life. A payout on his life would insure at least that his sister would be taken care of for the rest of her days, far beyond what he'd already done for her. *I wonder if she makes more than I do now?* He'd never ask because knowing she did would only add to his depression. Neither of them would get rich working for the police, though; that was certain.

Claire and Sam entered his small office and managed to squeeze into the chairs in front of Matt's desk. Sam looked like the cat who ate the canary; Claire was more stoic.

"I can see you two have something for me," Matt said. "The lady goes first."

He smiled at Claire; she glanced at Sam, who nodded his agreement for her going first. *Team building—isn't it wonderful*, thought Matt.

"We both have found some interesting details about Chester Trent's financial situation. With help from our IT people, to be honest." Sam nodded again.

"Don't keep me in suspense."

"Ever heard of *Our Country First*?" Claire said. Matt shook his head in the negative. "It's an obscure non-profit organization that supposedly wants to make Britain great again, to borrow some words from those Yanks' fascists, and does this by funneling funds obtained from donations to MPs' campaigns for Parliament if they promise to promote far-right fascist-type policies. Those include more funding for law enforcement, ending wasteful social programs and socialism in general, excluding immigrants and migrants and generally making their lives miserable, halting government takeover or control of private corporations, giving the monarchy more power, etc. The down payment for Chester's house was paid by *OCF*; his monthly mortgage payment is also paid by them. All hush-hush, of course; they don't advertise this perk."

"So, *OCF* is a political action group that rewarded him for some favor rendered? I wonder what he did for them that earned him that reward?"

Both officers shrugged. "Claire called their HQ," Sam said, "and got the run-around. I asked my brother who lives in Penrith to talk to his MP's people—that wanker isn't an outright fascist yet but certainly supports some of the policies Claire mentioned—and find out if they ever did anything like rewarding someone for services rendered, and they said they'd never heard of such a thing."

"There are three things we need to consider then," Matt said. "Why did Chester receive this gift? Was it legal? And does it have anything to do with why he was killed? I must confess I don't know how to proceed."

"Maybe one of our police VIPs has a friend in *NCA*?" Sam said. "We need to know if they're investigating *OCF*."

"Same thing for *MI5*," Claire said.

Matt cringed. He couldn't imagine Alan going to either MI5 or NCA hat in hand and begging for help. Matt certainly wouldn't. And neither one would ask a police VIP to intercede either. In Matt's case, especially not the Commissioner.

But who else can pursue these questions? Matt could only think of one person: Major Arnold Trent. *But will he even care about the questions if he doesn't give a damn about solving his father's murder?* The major was a liaison between the MoD and MI5, and maybe, because of that, he'd know some VIP at NCA as well, an organization that had taken over some of that spook agency's work in 2013, against organized gangs in particular.

Then again, MI5 or NCA might not care about *OCF*, only seeing them as yet another pressure and splinter group funding far-right political campaigns. *Someone must keep track of these far-right groups, though,* thought Matt. *At least, Arnold might have an idea who that is.*

Peter Grimes, Commissioner of the South Sheffield Area Constabulary, gestured for Andrew Bixby, the Rother Valley District's Superintendent of Detectives, to join him around the fireplace rather than having to move his bloated and bulky body behind his fancy desk with its clean top devoid of paperwork. Andrew sank into the leather chair next to the commissioner, noting that the man had just finished tea. Because Grimes was a narcissist and often a terrible host, he hadn't waited for the Super, even though Andrew had arrived early for the appointment.

"Tell me, Andy, how is Matt Cooper working out at Wath Station?"

"Early days. Alan MacDonald says he's organized, is running investigations well, and has the respect of his team members."

"That's a problem then. Along with many other officers, his team members probably think I was unfair. You know I won't tolerate rebels among our ranks, what some call 'individual thinkers' when they're just 'loose cannons.' Be on the lookout for mistakes he makes. I want to hang him out to dry."

"You might only create more rebels."

Peter slapped the arm of his chair as he equated that in his mind with rebellious behavior. "This is my police force, damn it! No criticisms allowed. I'm the one who determines policy and must deal with the media when serious business needs done. Not you, not Alan, and certainly not Detective Inspector Matthew Cooper!"

Andy had to stifle a smile in response to the man's immature tantrum. Peter was like a schoolyard bully who reminded the Super of a certain ex-US president who couldn't stand the thought that he'd lost the 2020 election in what could be called a rout in 21st century American politics. More than a narcissist, that man, like Grimes, was an autocrat, certainly more like Hitler than Mother Teresa. Andy believed that he and other police VIPs' jobs had become in large part making huge efforts to mitigate their own wankers' errors in leadership. Peter was a favorite of the Lord Mayor, though, a man who had no power, and the Council, whose members did, some assuming they had too much like Grimes. None of the first had any idea about what proper policing might be and only responded to negative publicity; sadly, Peter Grimes didn't either.

"I'm serious, Andy. If you can't pin something dirty on that yob, make something up. He's dangerous!"

For whom? The Council? For Peter? Andy felt he was in between a rock and a hard place, the rock being the police in the Sheffield Constabulary who'd admired and supported DI Cooper despite the Commissioner's attacks, and the hard place being that same Commissioner and the Council members who either absolutely feared Peter or supported him beyond reason.

"I'll see what I can do."

Andrew Bixby left the Commissioner's office hating his job.

SAMPLE

Chapter Nine

The Video Interview

Matt decided to jump into 21st century technology by having a Zoom-like chat with Major Arnold Trent. Thanks to the police department's IT personnel, the technology was a lot easier to get working for them than the MoD's bureaucracy. Classification issues got in the way of the latter in addition to overly protective military staff paying too much attention to both MoD and MI5's protocols about who could talk to whom.

Matt had to settle for a late-night call to the major in his London flat. The detective didn't apologize—most of the problems were MoD and Home Office's faults, after all—so he jumped right in with his questions.

After explaining the arrangement between *OCF* and Chester Trent, Matt said, "Did you know about this?"

"I had no idea. I'd heard about *OCF* from my liaison work with MI5, but that group of fascists is only one of many, Inspector, all small organizations buzzing like annoying gnats around the UK with not enough personnel to slap them down."

Matt tried not to smile. Many people, himself included, would consider the entire MoD to be a very large fascist organization, especially now with so many years of Conservative Party rule. The Iron Lady, the first of many far-right PMs, now looked tame in comparison, just like current conservatives in the US were to the far right of Ronald Reagan, Thatcher's old fellow conspirator across the pond. "Do you have any idea what your father did to receive this perk?"

"Or didn't do? No, I have no idea. My father and I didn't have a normal father-son relationship. I thought I explained that to you."

Matt ignored the personal attack. "Do you have any idea who might tell us that? It could be important for solving our case."

"You think that arrangement had something to do with his murder? Sounds farfetched to me. But I'll agree the perk is a bit unusual. I guess I'm not surprised. Chester could never be called a liberal. As far as I know, he never voted in any election, but he would have felt right at home in the Nazis SS, I'm guessing. And God knows what he was doing all those years when he wasn't part of our lives. When I visited, I could see he didn't even want to talk to me."

"Not approving of your position or work?"

"Maybe. Or I just reminded him of what an arse he'd been. I gave him some leeway, though. Old people often go off the deep end and refuse to trust anyone or admit their lives were shite."

"Someone still murdered him. I can't accept that becoming a cold case. Not this soon anyway." Matt thought a moment. "Do you know if anyone in NCA could tell me about *OCF*'s inner workings?"

"I can ask around at MI5 and there as well. If his arrangement was a one-off, though, I might not get anywhere. I can't promise anything, but I'll query a few people for you. I'm assuming you're more interested in the information than who provides it?"

"Correct. That relationship is one of our few clues."

"It might not have anything to do with his murder."

"He certainly wasn't killed as part of a robbery. I'm thinking there's a revenge motive involved."

“For what he did for *OCF*? Could be, but unlikely. Revenge for what? I might be the first in line as suspects for topping the old bastard, but no problems I have now can really be blamed on him.”

“And you have a good alibi.”

There was a laugh. “I figured you plods would investigate that. I’ll ask around and get back to you ASAP. Okay?”

“Thank you.”

From his experience with the major so far, Matt didn’t assume that Arnold would be offering any useful information anytime soon. Matt figured the son could if he wanted, but it was clear he didn’t fret much about finding his father’s killer.

There were a few other avenues that might lead to clues, though, and an unexpected one turned up a clue. Reggie Brown, one of the IT blokes who’d helped Claire and Sam discover the Chester Trent-*OCF* deal, found some posts in an *OCF*-sponsored chatgroup made by some fascist-friendly yob named Paul that referred to Chester Trent about a week before the latter’s murder.

“Why are we wasting money on an old prat who’s no longer actively supporting our cause?” Paul had asked.

After some discussion of a few details where members of the chatgroup hinted at Chester’s deal without giving any details, the moderator had ended the discussion thread with, “HQ has its reasons. No one should question them.”

“No idea who this Paul is?” Matt said to Reggie, who shook his dreadlocks negatively. “Any idea where *OCF* HQ is?”

“Yes. Knew you would ask that.”

His Jamaican lilt was pleasant on the ear—Matt could imagine his soft tenor singing calypso, reggae, or ska—but Matt knew the bloke had been born in the UK and was a third generation relative of immigrants. *Grandparents were probably here long before Teresa May had wanted to deport Jamaican immigrants to make political points.* Turned out that there were *OCF* “chapters” all over the UK, including Northern Ireland. Their local one could be found near Sheffield Center. Matt even knew the building.

Matt thanked Reggie for all his help and grabbed his mobile as the IT expert left. “Sam, meet me in front with a pool car. We’re going to make a little trip downtown.”

Chapter Ten

Bixby Attacks

Andrew Bixby rapped on Alan MacDonald's door jamb to announce his visit. Alan looked up, surprised.

"What brings you to our station, Andy? Getting bored downtown and needing a change of scenery because you're seeing that bloated sack Grimes far too often?"

Andy took a chair. "That arse gave me an assignment I dinnae keen, Chief Inspector MacDonald."

"Aha, a formal visit because Grimes is up to no good as usual. And don't show off that Scottish accent you lost quite a while ago. Doesn't work on me. I might have been born in Edinburgh, but my ancestors can be traced all the way back to the Normans who defeated yours soundly. What dirty chore did our commissioner force 'pon you this time?"

"I'll be passing it on to you. You're his immediate superior. I need dirt on Matt Cooper."

Alan frowned. "Old Grimes's girdle is still too tight, I see. Matt Cooper was set up, he was cleared, and he's doing good work for me now. I told you that the other day."

"And Peter got on my case afterwards. I don't know why he's made Matt into his favorite target."

Alan pointed his finger at his visitor. "Then you damn well better find out. I'm not playing Peter's game. Mr. Grimes is more a dirty politician than a competent police commissioner. Turn the tables on him!"

"How would I do that?"

"You and I both know that Matt must know something about that bloated sack that he doesn't want anyone else to know. Find out what it is so we can shut Grimes up for good. Matt might not even know what it is that he knows, but there's definitely something. Maybe from Peter's past? He inherited more than the position from the previous commissioner, I'm sure. A long line of bad blokes there, I dare say. Maybe even that old yob's business scheme?"

"You mean the child sex scandal?"

Alan thought a moment. "That, or anything else that's remotely criminal. Maybe he's a card-carrying member of *OCF*?" He had to explain to Andy what that was. "Um, and that might explain a lot of things, to be honest. I assume you told the old pillock about our current case. From the victim's son, we've discovered that *OCF* gave the victim the down payment for his house and continues to make the monthly mortgage payments."

Andy's eyebrows raised and merged into a crawling caterpillar. "Grimes is probably farther to the right than Hitler's Gestapo leaders. Aye, I might take a look at that."

"Be careful. One thing Matt's history shows us is that Grimes can play dirty and try to ruin your career. Look before you leap." Alan waved a dismissive hand. "And I always need you as a moat around my own castle, fetid waters and all. You haven't yet become a complete Judas."

"I'll ignore that and not because it's a terrible, mixed metaphor. I still want to be able to tell Grimes you'll be looking for something on Cooper. It's better that he assumes we're his steadfast lackeys."

"Tell him all you want, even that I think that he's full of shite. All I can say is that any other attack on Cooper might cause a massive resignation at several police stations. Fair warning."

After Bixby departed, Alan thought more about Andy's visit. He decided not to wait for Andy to investigate what irked Peter about Matt. The Super was older than Alan and had always been deserving of the nickname "plod" even as a patrolman. His only real change during the passing years had been the need for a larger uniform each year—not as bulky as Grimes but getting there. He'd never done well as a detective; he was more an able bureaucrat, albeit an honest one as far as Alan knew, a paper-pusher *par excellence*. He often joined Andy to meet the press; they both handled that crowd of prats well enough.

But Alan thought that Andy never would be able to find out why Peter Grimes had it in for Matt Cooper. History showed that the Commissioner hated the detective inspector. There had to be something that had but a bramble up Peter's butt, well-hidden there in the dark.

Alan wanted Matt and the team to solve the murder of Chester Trent. For that to occur, the team couldn't be distracted by the commissioner's vendetta. But Alan figured that he also could use his once-keen detective skills to dig into the commissioner's past. There had to be something there, so by damn he'd do his best to find it!

That motivated him to see what other distractions Matt Cooper and his team had. He soon picked up the phone. After being passed around to several phones without answers—where the hell was everyone?—he finally got DC Dewi Owen.

"Any joy for that bank robbery case?" Alan said.

"One of many, Guv," Dewi said. "The victim might not be your usual one. Her name's Elaine Frost, and she has form that goes all the way back to university days."

"Arrests or jail?"

"Arrests and not enough evidence for a trip to gaol. Better said, both her clients, students for the most part, and suppliers who once were willing to testify, recanted or disappeared."

"She was a drugs dealer? Are you telling me the bank robbery was drugs-related?"

"I'm telling you what we learned from Holmes. Can't really ask her about the bank robbery, can we?"

"Maybe that's the point. She knew too much, so maybe the robbers silenced her? I saw that Cooper interviewed the bank manager. Is he suspected of being an inside man?"

"I doubt it. The poor bloke almost had too close a haircut. At first, the silly prat told them he didn't have the combination to the bank vault. After they threatened to cut off a teller's nipples, he changed his tune, but they slashed him instead. Brave but stupid. He probably hardly makes enough to feed his family, so why become a defender of the greedy board of directors' funds they've stolen from their clients?"

MacDonald ignored the disparaging comments about banks because he agreed with the sentiments if not the facts. "I don't suppose anyone there knew who the bank robbers were?"

"No, and we still don't. Working on it by looking for relatives and friends of Miss Frost, sir. Lots of cases, no progress. We need more personnel."

"I know that. Tell your DI to give me a call, will you? We might want to shuffle some priorities."

Chapter Eleven

A Fan of Pure Bloodlines

Matt and Sam found that the bloke who'd participated in that *OCF* chatroom had form. Paul Dixon had been arrested twice for leading a far-right protest downtown that had blocked traffic, annoying for people just trying to get home to their families but not felonious by any means, so no time in the gaol. He'd also been arrested twice for assault and battery, both cases domestic disputes with a wife that had been violations of restraining orders; they had led to a messy divorce and her leaving the immediate area, fearing the wanker's retribution.

These were old records, though, involving an angry young man who was now in his mid-forties. And nowhere to be found!

Of course, they didn't spend much time trying to track him down. Instead, they got the ex's address and decided to drive almost to Manchester to pay her a visit that afternoon. Lisa was still a cashier at a Tesco, so they had to wait for her coffee break. She joined them in the store's cafeteria.

She took their measure as she stirred her coffee that Matt had paid for. "I haven't seen Paul for years, officers, and I hope to never see him again. He was a violent man, so I must assume he's even more so now."

"Tell us about the protests," Matt said.

"He's always been a violent, racist prick, so he must be even worse now with all the migrants who've come here. Often called me a 'brown slut.' My grandparents came here from Italy after the war. We're a bit too swarthy for him and his friends, I suppose, but when we first met, I thought that didn't bother him and he found me exotic. But he got progressively worse as he got more and more involved with those creepy fascist types. They always talked about keeping the UK bloodlines pure and throwing out all the country's invaders. At first, I thought it was just akin to my little brothers playing at war, but he and his mates became more and more hateful. I cringe when I see that shite still going on here and other places in Europe. Even in America now."

Matt decided that Lisa was a smart woman who'd had a run of bad luck. "Do you know anything about his connection with *OCF*?" Again, he had to explain what that was.

"Not a surprise. I have no idea what he was referring to in that comment, though. Obviously, he objected to *OCF* doing something that he considered a deviation from a purist's Nazi agenda. My grandparents always said that Il Duce and the other Italian fascists were gentle lambs compared to Hitler and the Germans. Paul was Irish, but he would have felt right at home working in the Gestapo."

"Would he be violent enough to murder someone?" Sam said.

"Someone who he thought got better treatment than he deserved?" Matt added.

She shrugged. "His temper might smolder for days when he learned about it, but I guess he might. He was a purist who disliked any deviations from those ultimate fascist goals, like I said. Much more so than those numpties who invaded the US Capitol a while ago, for example. Maybe more like the politicians who called them tourists to deter the prosecution of that ex-president for promoting a coup?"

"Hard to talk about ideological purity when we're discussing fascism," Sam observed, "because that's not an ideology."

Matt glanced at Sam, surprised by his astute observation. *I'm glad I brought you along!* “So, Lisa, you have no idea where Paul might hang out now?”

“No idea at all. Don't want to know, like I said. Maybe some *OCF* VIP might know if you can get the bastard to talk.”

How to find one? Matt asked himself.

It turned out that the Sheffield HQ of *OCF* wasn't in the city but in Laughton, a neighboring suburb not far from Wath-upon-Dearne. That information came from Major Trent via MI5. Matt figured the source was reliable, so he decided that Claire and he should pay them a visit.

They arrived at the new six-story building, maybe turn-of-the-century vintage, and parked the little EV from the police pool in the underground garage.

“I hate these dark carparks,” Claire said. “Danger, danger, Will Robinson!”

Matt understood the last words: Using a famous and oft-repeated line from an old American sitcom still viewable on private telly channels, she was stating that such places were dangerous, especially for women alone.

They walked to the lift and took it to the lobby. After reading the building's directory there—the address the major had given Matt had no floor indicated—they found that *OCF* shared the third floor. All the other offices were legal this and that, making Matt recall Shakespeare's famous quote.

They took another lift to *OCF*'s floor; their offices were to the left as they exited. Office, not offices, they soon learned.

The plate-glass window in the entry door said *Our Country First* in large etched letters, with *Parliamentary Consultants* in smaller letters etched below that, all in golden Gothic font with black borders. They entered and found a reception area where a chubby young secretary with golden curls and blue eyes could have been on a poster inviting them to join the Nazi Youth Corps; she smacked her gum while she turned dictation into a computer word-file. At least, that's what it looked like from the ear bud. She turned, took the bud out, and glared at them.

“Do you two have an appointment?”

“Do we need one?” Matt said as both Claire and he showed their young inquisitor their warrant cards.

“Not for me, but I'm not allowed to help you. And Mr. Prince only advises our area's MPs and their staff, not plods.”

“Maybe those very important and sophisticated servants of the people wouldn't like to hear you call us plods, young lady. Such language certainly provides evidence for ignorant rudeness in an organization pretending to advise MPs in their policy decisions. To put it bluntly—” Matt leaned forward to inspect her lanyard “—Miss Tilson, we can either see Mr. Prince here now or later at the police station after some uniformed officers bring him in.”

She mumbled something that sounded like “Labour louts” but nodded. “Put your fascist club membership cards away. I'll ask him if he has time to waste on you.”

Matt smiled at that and winked at Claire. *Ironic that a person working for a far-right organization would say we're the fascists!*

While they waited, Matt's eyes wandered around the sterile reception area that contained only the receptionist's desk and chair and a few more old chairs for visitors who had to sit against the opposite wall that was badly in need of some paint. *OCF doesn't waste money on luxury at least*, he thought. But he had no idea what the boss's office looked like.

His eyes took in the huge poster on the wall to the left of the receptionist's desk. That bleak and wrinkled monstrosity could hardly be called decorative. All in red and black, it showed a clinched fist with an eagle tattoo on the back of the hand. The inkwork—indeed, the entire poster—would remind any student of history of the Nazi movement that had turned the continent into a smoldering wasteland mid-twentieth century. He thought the twenty-first might be heading towards something similar. *Would this office be one of the reasons?*

England had largely escaped the extensive damage of continental Europe in those dark days of World War II, but there'd been extensive damage done by Nazi missiles like in the Luftwaffe's "Sheffield Blitz" on December 12 and 15 of 1940. Hitler's wet dream of becoming the ruler of all Europe—"Il Duce" Mussolini in Italy. Marshall Petain in France, and other European fascists would have only become jesters in the king's court—could yet be Europe's fate, maybe even America's, if the real nightmare planned by Putin, Xi, and other autocrats managed to turn the entire planet into their playground. *Not if we can stop it!*

The receptionist made them sit there for about five minutes while she talked to her boss in the office in the rear, but the *OCF* VIP finally received them.

"Are Labour activists now using the police to hassle us?" he said with nary an introduction or handshake.

Considering the continuing rudeness and still smarting from the wait, Matt took a chair in front of the prat's ornate desk without an invitation and gestured for Claire to take the other.

"FYI, Mr. Prince: Police in the UK are apolitical, but we do expect UK citizens who at least pretend to deserve the name to answer our questions. First, why is *OCF* paying for Chester Trent's house? Second, can you tell us where we can find Paul Dixon?"

"I'm afraid I can't help you. I don't know either person. End of story. Now please leave."

At least he said "please," Matt thought. "Not good enough. And perhaps we will just have to ask you to accompany us to our station where we can have a proper interrogation?" Prince fidgeted and frowned but made no comment, so Matt plowed ahead. "We have concrete evidence that *OCF* paid Mr. Trent's down payment for his house and is continuing to pay each month's mortgage bill." He pointed to the five vertical filing cabinets. "For my second question, I'm sure it will only take a suggestion from you to encourage Miss Tilson to provide us with information about Paul Dixon."

"I'm doing neither one."

Matt shrugged. "You'll then spend some time enjoying the accommodations at our station for obstruction of justice after we serve a warrant to inspect all your files. Every one of them! We're trying to solve a murder, one you might very well be responsible for. The Home Office doesn't approve of such behavior, I dare say."

Prince shrugged. "Just try to do something like that, and you'll find yourself unemployed and on the dole, Inspector. *OCF* has powerful friends who outrank you, or any other plod, for that matter."

"We shall see. I will call your bluff and raise you with a CPS prosecution, sir. I believe we can act before you can because your powerful friends won't give a maggot like you the time of day anytime soon. They're too busy trying to avoid the people's wrath in Parliament, probably because they take *OCF*'s advice far too often. Good day, Mr. Prince."

"That sounded great, Matt, but can we back that up?" Claire said as they entered the lift.

"I know we can move faster than that fat arse," Matt said, "if Alan keeps it all close to his vest. Whether we can get a warrant is another question. So, we need a plan B."

“And what’s that?”

“You’ll be driving again so I can think of one.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Twelve

More than a Meeting of Minds

After returning to the station, Matt was debating whether he should go home but felt guilty about even considering it. *OCF* was a lead that he'd follow up the next day, but he'd be the first to say they were a long way from finding Chester's murderer.

Matt was also afraid they were approaching the case arse-backwards, especially if the killing was a random act, which it could very well be. Why would a common thief think Chester owned anything of value to steal? An addict yearning for his next fix might have attacked the old fellow to steal a watch or some other item to pawn, but there was nothing to indicate that was what had occurred. Or a mentally ill yob might just kill for the fun of it? He wondered if there occurred more random acts of violence than kindness. His occupation biased him towards one answer, of course.

He was staring off to the side of his desk at his full in-tray when there was a knock on his door jamb. He looked up to see Lynne Bridges. Her arrival changed his dark thoughts to more pleasant ones that were a bit lusty, to be honest.

"Hello, Inspector Cooper. I'm going to get some takeaway on the way home because I don't feel like cooking tonight. Want to join me?"

"Bad day?"

"Considering my occupation, they're all bad if I'm busy, but today was among the worst. An entire family was gassed—parents and three kids, and the wife was pregnant."

"CO-poisoning?"

"You've got it. No foul play unless someone damaged their furnace on purpose. They died the same night we were both all nice and cozy at the pub. Not even that cold, but I'm guessing the wife liked it a bit warmer because of her condition. I would. Nana of the family found them this morning. Something to be said for those older houses heated by multiple fireplaces."

"That's worse than my day. Sorry."

"So, should I get takeaway for two?" He nodded with a smile. "Indian okay? I need a spicy curry to prove to myself that life is still worth living."

"If I can add two bottles of a good red, and I'm your man."

"You're on. Maybe literally."

He wondered what that meant. "Let's split the cost, though. We both work for the government."

The spicy aroma from the lamb vindaloo takeaway immediately filled Lynne's flat after it arrived. She'd put Chopin on the stereo and begun setting the small table. He'd uncorked one of the wine bottles so it could breathe and watched her.

They had come to her place because his belongings that had finally arrived still sat in their boxes on the middle of his living room floor for the most part. His new flat wasn't yet a place to receive guests of any sort, let alone a beautiful and interesting woman.

"We have to make some plans for a few concerts," he said. "Chopin on CDs, while nice, is nothing like a live recital, even from a student. I've heard some great music even at university recitals. Right price too."

“Do you play?” she said, stopping her preparations long enough to taste the wine. She nodded, and he topped off her glass and poured himself one.

“I’ve a keyboard. Full eighty-eight and sounds like a grand if you ignore the lack of pedals. A lot of right-handed melodies and left-handed chords when I’m sightreading, but I took lessons at one time. We had an old family upright.”

“Same here. Probably makes us appreciate more the real pros and brilliant students, I dare say. Let’s tuck in. I’m peckish, to be honest.”

“Likewise. Say, we forgot dessert. I often do a mango lassi with Indian food. I suppose that doesn’t go well with cabernet, though, does it?”

She smiled at him. “I had other plans for dessert. Here’s a hint: You won’t find it in my fridge.”

Despite their hunger, there were leftovers. Leaving everything on the table, Lynne changed to another CD.

“I don’t know about you, but that would have been a heavy meal for four or five people. Let’s get some exercise. The Strauss family will motivate us.”

“Viennese waltzes? I’m no ballroom dancer, Doctor Bridges.”

“Polkas, Matt.” She opened her arms, the remote in one hand. “Come on, Inspector. Let’s work off some calories before our dessert. I’ll teach you the basics.”

He was clumsy at first but once he got past the macho assumption that the man had to always take the lead, he got into it. He was soon perspiring, though, more from her busy hands that were often all over him than the polka music.

“Time out!” he gasped after a thigh-slapping polka had made him see the logic of those airy Bavarian leather shorts and flowing white shirts.

He went to the table and drank half a glass of water. She came up behind him, but her hands came around and unzipped his pants.

“Time for some different exercise, Inspector. In my bedroom. By the way, this doctor says nice package.”

They both had put their mobiles on vibrate, but only one awoke them.

“Yours.” She glanced at the clock that was also on the nightstand. “You’d better answer.”

The text message was a surprise: Rebecca Tilson, Prince’s receptionist wanted to talk to Matt—alone, without Claire. He asked Lynne what she thought about that.

“She obviously knows what’s in *OCF*’s records. Text her back and then take a shower. It reeks like a London whorehouse here. I’ll come join you as soon as I get something that might resemble breakfast sorted.”

There was a bit of twisting and turning, not exactly a feverish polka, as they had oral sex in the shower, but Matt decided that he could get used to that kind of send-off to his workday. In Lynne’s galley kitchen, he tried mightily to avoid the distraction of the doctor’s bare breasts. Her robe had fallen open while she whipped up a bacon-and-egg scramble accompanied by some scones with real butter, making him happy he hadn’t suggested his place with nothing unpacked and his empty fridge.

He supposed that her extensive medical training had taught her everything there was to know about the insides and outsides of the human body, male or female, and had no problem with nudity, but the tingling in his nether regions, whether memory from the shower or renewed anticipation, implied he might not be so nonchalant about it as she was.

“Why the change of heart, do you think? She was rude to us.” He was trying to avoid thinking about their wild night by considering the drudgery of his current major case.

“Key clue maybe, Detective: You were with Claire. She might have a thing for older men. Or she just doesn’t like what happened to Chester. Just make sure I don’t see your handsome, sexy body on one of my slabs. These people show a lot of signs of being fanatics...and possibly murderers. How many did the Nazis kill even before Kristallnacht?”

“Or they’re clever bastards like Goebbels *et al.* who are using fanatics for their own evil agendas. So, how should I respond to Miss Tilson?”

“Um, take one of your DCs with you to the meeting but have them stay in the car? It’s improbable that anyone in that office would dare attack a copper, but you never know.”

There was a new ping for another text message. He read it and frowned. “You’re not going to believe this! I’m to appear for a disciplinary hearing downtown this afternoon. Victor Prince complained about our visit. Called it police harassment.”

“All the more reason to have a chinwag with Miss Tilson this morning then. Maybe that’s what triggered her move.”

Chapter Thirteen

Closing the Case

Matt met Rebecca in a coffee bar not far from her place of work. He'd chosen a cubby towards the back. She sat opposite him and slid across the padded seat to end up against the wall.

"I don't want anyone to see me here. Word could get back to that damned prat Prince."

He nodded. "Understood. Can I offer you any refreshment?"

"Maybe a latte? Thanks."

Matt flagged a waiter, ordered a latte for her and a black coffee for himself. Knowing it wouldn't take long, they waited for their drinks to come. After adding even more sugar, she leaned back and sighed.

"That old man didn't deserve to be killed, Inspector," she said. "He did what they asked, but they wanted to make sure he didn't share any secrets."

"First, what did he do, Rebecca? And second, who are they? Do you know who killed him?"

"You're not recording this, are you?" He shook his head in the negative. "Good. It's off the record as they say on the telly." She smiled. "I think the media would call me an 'undisclosed source.' Keep it that way. Otherwise, I'll deny everything." She took another sip. "Chester was no angel, but he was nice to me. They used him for years, even rewarded him, and then they killed him. They followed Paul Dixon's advice."

"I'm not following you. Could you be more specific?"

"Chester and others were used to threaten people. I have a whole list of people *OCF* has threatened. I also have a whole list of *OCF* members no one knows about. Even plods are on that second list. And, of course, there are some MPs and their cronies."

"Is *OCF* just a fascist organization then?"

"I'm not sure what that means, but I'll stipulate that they're not Labour wankers in any way. Historically, I think they're more like the old IRA. There's a military arm, and the MPs and other VIPs form something like Sinn Fein, the public side. Just an analogy, of course."

Matt's opinion of Rebecca Tilson was changing as she spoke. She wasn't just a dumb receptionist. She'd earned some respect. "Let's get back to what Chester did for *OCF* to earn a house."

"That's easy. He eliminated two enemies of the Commissioner."

Matt almost dropped his mug. "Assassinations? Does that mean that Peter Grimes is an *OCF* member?"

She frowned. "Didn't I say that some plods are on my second list?" He nodded. "Work with me, Inspector. I can't dawdle here!"

"Okay. So, what happened?"

"They were afraid that old Chester was going to get dementia and start blabbing about all their sins, I suppose. Paul convinced them they had to make sure that Chester couldn't do that. He's the one who topped the Commissioner's two enemies." She flashed a sly smile. "Mind you, I'm not a raving member of the Labour Party. I just think that nice old man didn't deserve to be silenced. He wasn't hurting a soul and deserved his little house and some peace at the end of his life." She shrugged. "I have no idea how you're going to handle all this, and frankly I don't want to know. I just want Paul Dixon to pay for what he did."

He nodded. "I can't use what you've told me as evidence, but it will provide guidance for us for collecting some. Do you know where we can find Paul Dixon?"

"And evidence against him. There's a bank where he has a safety deposit box. He's always bragging about how much dirt he has on everyone; I'm surprised they haven't silenced him as well. I would have." She sighed. "I made the mistake of sleeping with him once, so he thinks I favor him. Never again. That vicious bastard likes it too rough!"

"You might want to be careful, Miss Tilson. You've been dealing with killers." *And what should I call the Commissioner now?* The man was sure to be at the meeting that afternoon. *Too many shitestorms!*

Matt kept what was revealed in the warrant request for the safety deposit box to the judge to a minimum, following Alan's guidance. In particular, he didn't mention anything that Tilson had revealed about Grimes, not even to the DCI. He wanted to close Chester's case first.

Alan in fact had seemed a bit circumspect.

"I hope there's plenty of incriminating evidence in that box."

There was, but none of it involved the Commissioner, only Paul Dixon and Chester Trent. It was enough to arrest Dixon for Trent's murder, though. Unfortunately, Dixon had gotten wind of the impending arrest—from *the Commish?*—and now had a hostage, Rebecca Tilson, when they showed up at his building.

"I've called for an ARU," Matt said to Claire and Sam outside that building. He saw their expressions. "Aye, I know. They're likely to take him out in a body bag. Tilson too, for that matter, as collateral damage. I'd rather that none of that happens, if only to question the yob. I think he was taking orders and was paid, but we can't prove that yet."

"May I talk to him?" Claire said.

"Be my guest." He handed her the phone. "He's on speed-dial. Be forewarned: I won't let any of us confront him face-to-face. That's far too dangerous. He's a killer."

"Hello, Paul," she said after they connected. "It's Claire, Rebecca's friend." Matt didn't mind that lie because Tilson would probably play along or was too scared to tell Paul otherwise. "Tell me why you're doing this to her."

"To live another day and fight her kind, those traitors who are destroying our country! All of them! Liberal sluts like her, pandering politicians, and all those damned immigrants! People like me lose our jobs to them. We want them gone!"

"Killing them's not the solution. In particular, harming Rebecca doesn't make sense at all. She thought you loved her. Is she okay?"

"She's scared. I am too. I know this can only end badly."

"Not if you surrender now. And she's scared of you, Paul. She probably wonders what's come over you. Why you've become so crazed."

"Then she doesn't understand me. Not surprising. People like you are all alike, not understanding our problems and out to destroy our country. She's gagged and tied. I don't want her screaming or trying to fight me. I need to think!"

"There's nothing to think about, Paul. You have two choices: Either you can surrender—what Rebecca would want, I'm sure—or be neutralized by our armed officers who'll be arriving soon."

"That's plod-speak for murdering me, I'd wager."

"Yes, you needlessly dying. You and possibly her. A surrender saves you both."

"Give me five."

Claire raised an eyebrow to Matt.

"It'll take at least that long for the ARU to arrive. Tell him okay."

Claire did so, and both detectives noted the time. After the five minutes passed, he took back the phone and was about to call Paul when the front door opened. Paul pushed out Rebecca and slammed the door behind her. She stumbled, regained her balance, and ran towards them, hands in the air.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" When she reached Claire, the DC hugged her. "He's planning something. He said to me, 'Have a good life!' Maybe he's going to kill himself?"

"Anything's possible in his state," Matt said. "Has he calmed down at all?"

"No. If anything, he's wound even more tight."

At that moment there was a loud *boom*! All three ducked. Tilson's little house became a giant fireball. Flaming pieces of it shot off in every direction, some landing nearby.

"What did he do?" Rebecca screamed.

Claire hugged the woman again and glanced at Matt.

"I'm guessing he created a gas leak and then lit a match. I'll call the fire department."

Chapter Fourteen

A New Commissioner

Matt entered the meeting room, looked around at the attendees, and cringed. It was like déjà vu: Alan MacDonald had replaced his previous DCI, but the two Council members who oversaw policing in the Sheffield area, the Commissioner Peter Grimes, and the Superintendent of Detectives Andy Bixby were the same in both meetings.

"Sit down, Inspector Cooper," said Rupert Littleton, one of the Council members. He gestured toward an empty chair next to Alan.

Matt sat and tried to maintain a stoic expression.

"There are two items on this meeting's agenda," Rupert said, opening a folder with a flourish. "The first is a complaint from *OCF* originated by Victor Prince, a complaint that you harassed him. What do you have to say about that, Inspector?"

"One man's harassment is a policeman's quest for information. Our visit to *OCF* led to solving a puzzling murder case. Its solution has implicated both *OCF* and Mr. Prince, as records obtained by serving a legal warrant have now shown."

"After the fact."

"And after their receptionist did her civic duty by telling us about Paul Dixon and Victor Prince's participation in the scheme to kill Chester Trent. She was almost killed herself for doing so."

"Do you think the Crown Prosecution Service will allow that case to go forward to trial?"

"Moot point, Councilman Littleton. Paul Dixon, the murderer, blew himself up. Murder case solved. Chester Trent can now rest in peace."

"Do you believe that's the right way to apply justice?"

"Not the best choice maybe, but what's done is done. If you don't want to pursue *OCF* and Prince, that's your business. I understand they have a lot of friends in Parliament who depend on them, so maybe they'd back that decision. I wouldn't."

That made Littleton smile and the other councilman frown. Matt wondered why Bixby and Grimes remained as stoic as Matt had been.

"Inspector MacDonald, it's your turn to introduce our second item of business."

Alan glanced at Matt and then glared at Bixby and Grimes. "That second item requires the resignation of Peter Grimes as Police Commissioner. Let me explain."

Matt learned that Andy Bixby and Alan had discovered everything Rebecca Tilson had told them and then some. Peter Grimes would also be charged with two murders. Two burly detectives from downtown led him out of the meeting room.

"You're probably wondering, Inspector Cooper, what situation this leaves you in," said Bixby.

"It had crossed my mind because you and Alan wrapped up everything and put a nice bow on it, except for vindicating me in the first place when I was forced to make the transfer that brought me to Wath station, and Councilman Littleton's objection to my pressure tactics with *OCF*. The first was a trumped-up charge; and the second is a stretch as well, considering the scandal involving *OCF*."

"Nevertheless, you did things that were in a gray area legally. Do you admit that?"

"Enough for Grimes to come after me, no. *OCF* deserves what they got."

"So, your policing *modus operandi* includes being judge and jury?" Rupert said.

“As much as the Council did when I was forced to leave my previous position. In fact, given what’s occurred now, I could take the police department to court and sue to get my old job back.” There were some frowns. Matt knew he’d probably lose—judges were members of the old boys’ club just like the Council members—but they also probably didn’t like the idea of bad PR. “I won’t do that.” He smiled at Alan. “I’m quite at home at our Wath station now. And all I can say about *OCF* is that anyone who pretends to be a patriot should be thinking about how to prosecute them for the multiple sins they’ve committed. That’s beyond my paygrade, but my team would be happy to add to whatever my Super and DCI have discovered about them and the people they serve.” He cleared his throat. “By the way, I can’t keep Rebecca Tilson from talking. She’s out of a job now and has no love for *OCF*. If she talks to the media, the scandal might very well involve some of you.”

Matt noted that Rupert glanced at his fellow councilman with an accusing look. *There might be some cleaning house in local government*, Matt thought.

“So, you left that meeting with only a slap on the hand?” Lynne said with a hearty laugh. They’d been enjoying a quiet and sensual moment after she’d rolled off him. His hand rested on one breast; both nipples were still aroused. *What a woman!*

“I’m worried now,” she continued. “Since you’ve been exonerated, do you plan to return to your old posting in Sheffield?” Her smile turned into a sexy pout. “Yes, worried...um, for continuing this sort of activity, at least.”

“Don’t worry,” he said.

He didn’t really want to discuss anything about the case and all its political ramifications, but he understood that her concern for the future of their relationship that had begun with such intensity. It was like they’d been searching for each other for years.

“I haven’t had much luck with relationships before. Too many blokes can’t cope with a smart woman.”

“Not my problem...and there are two main reasons why I won’t return to Sheffield Center. The first is that another plod has my old DI position now. It wouldn’t be fair for me to return because it was an honest-to-God promotion for him, not the parallel transfer I got to Wath.”

“I suppose it might be a bit embarrassing to the police VIPs as well if you returned there, like hanging out their dirty laundry for all to see. You’d be too close to their seat of power, constantly reminding them about what wankers they are. Who’s going to become the new commissioner?”

“Andy Bixby’s probably in the running. I don’t particularly like the bloke or even respect him, but at least he didn’t order a double murder like Peter Grimes did. And Andy worked with Alan MacDonald to nick Peter Grimes.” His hand went between her legs. He hoped to end the discussion that way and return to more pleasant activities.

But she was in a talkative mood now. *Women have the wrong priorities!*

“Maybe that was only a plan to steal Andy’s job?”

“Grimes is a fat fascist who literally sold his soul because of greed and desire for power. We could do worse with Andy as Commish and Alan as Super.”

“Your description of Grimes is nearly the best description of a fascist personality. As Henry Wallace, Roosevelt’s VP before Truman, said, ‘A fascist is one whose lust for money or power is combined with such an intensity of intolerance toward those of other races, parties, classes, religions, cultures, regions or nations as to make him ruthless in his use of deceit or

violence to attain his ends.’ Describes Putin, Xi, and that ex-American president to a T, and probably everyone connected with *OCF*, including Grimes.”

“Wow! You can remember a person and a quote that ancient and complicated? Especially after what we were just doing?”

“What we were just doing was a beautiful thing, Inspector, nothing like the darkness and ugliness world fascism has represented for a long time.”

“Still, how can you remember things like that? Not that I’d mind in other circumstances, especially since I can use it in my report.”

“You might want to avoid that. Once it’s in a report, you can’t take it back.” She patted his hand. “As for remembering, I originally trained as an ordinary ER doctor. It’s a lot more difficult to remember drug names when you’re in the ER in a hurry to treat an emergency patient. That’s why I left that. I can still help people, but it’s a more sedate process.”

He didn’t know what to say to that but thought it was a bit heavy for a post-coital discussion. *God, I’m sounding like a physician!* “I suppose we coppers have to depend more on our visual memory.”

She sighed. “A lot of surgical work involves visual and tactile memory except you have to allow for individual differences.” She demurred but didn’t remove his hand. “And now about Mr. Trent’s tattoo, Inspector. I’d seen similar ones about a half-dozen times before on bodies that came to me before you arrived here in Wath. *OCF* had a militaristic side to it. I figured Mr. Trent had been involved in that in some way.”

“We came to the same conclusion. Looks like the son had no idea, though. I’m not sure how much we’ve damaged them, but we at least solved our murder case.”

“Let’s change the topic: What’s your other reason for not returning to Sheffield?”

“You, of course. I wouldn’t have anyone to practice the polka with, for example. Or the enjoyment of other delights like tonight’s that make life so much more interesting.”

“We can continue with them if you can get it up again, Inspector. Otherwise, we can spoon and just get some sleep.” Now her hand went between his legs. “One fringe benefit live patients have over dead ones: My knowledge of anatomy helps me turn you into putty in my hands.”

Matt knew Lynne owned him then...and he would enjoy every minute of it.

**Initiation:
A British-Style Mystery
Steven M. Moore**

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List of Main Characters

Delphina “Daffy” Bednarik—young girl who’s Matt’s snout

Andrew Bixby—Police Commissioner

Lynne Bridges—police pathologist

Matt Cooper—Detective Inspector

Alan MacDonald—Superintendent of Detectives

Janet Kirk—Detective Chief Inspector

Kathrine “Kath” Cooper—SOCO and Matt’s sister

Sal Garcia—police IT specialist

Dewi Owen—Detective Constable on Matt’s team

Tommy—autistic boy whose mother is killed

Claire Walker—Detective Constable on Matt’s team

Chapter One

Moving On

"I guess I understand their logic," Matt Cooper said to Alan MacDonald.

His former DCI was moving on to become Superintendent of Detectives for the Rother Valley District of the Sheffield Constabulary; Andrew Bixby, the ex-Super who'd worked with Alan to prove the previous police commissioner had ordered the murders of two political opponents, would become the new commissioner. Several members of the Council implicated in that same scandal involving *Our Country First (OCF)*, an organization supporting far-right causes, had agreed to resign, even though there wasn't much evidence against them beyond receiving campaign funds from that far-right political-action group along with a few local MPs.

"Do we have a new DCI yet?" Matt continued.

He already knew he wouldn't be moving from DI to DCI at the Wath substation. Despite his team's aid rendered in the house-cleaning, he had far too much baggage. Sheffield's police VIPs would never reward him if only for that reason. Both Alan and Andy knew the truth, though.

Even Lynne Bridges, the best pathologist in the area in Matt's opinion, although he was biased because she was the love of his life, thought he'd bent the rules a bit. She'd never admit it, but he knew she liked that about him, among more carnal things her dead clients in the morgue couldn't provide.

"We had to go outside the area, Matt," Alan said. "Patience is required. The only DI who could have been ready for a promotion was you, and you've embarrassed too many powerful people."

Matt smiled at Alan's honest assessment of his situation. "That shouldn't be a negative for you and Andy."

"Agreed, but we've done our part in embarrassing them as well, if that's what sending a police commissioner to the gaol is called, so we will be watched. The three of us must tiptoe around for a while when it comes to our political crowd." He took a sip of his coffee. "You'll get your DCI soon enough. Until then, I'll have to hold down two positions, so I could use some extra help from you."

"Count on it. I suppose your wife can't wait for the new DCI to arrive."

"Her goal is to convince me to retire sooner than later so we can travel a bit. I'm getting some breathing room only because I've convinced her we can travel a bit more in comfort with a Super's pension than with a DCI's."

"For DI and beyond, the pay scales aren't that different. The Lord Mayor and Police Commissioner make less than some on the the Council."

"The mayor's job is largely for pomp and circumstance, and as the top copper, the commissioner has a lot of bureaucratic work for little pay if done right. Andy will do that well, of course. But please don't mention any of that to my wife because it would support her campaign for my early retirement."

The next morning, Matt dropped Lynne off at her morgue and parked his auto in the farthest part of the station's carpark out from under the trees. That meant a longer walk into the station and his office, not particularly a pleasant one in bad weather, but it avoided having his car bombed by birds. As he neared the first row of spaces tucked under the trees, a woman he didn't

recognize was staring at a gloppy mess on her Jaguar's bonnet left by some kamikaze avian bomber. Perhaps she'd thought they'd shade her fancy paint job from the strong sun?

"Visitors don't know to avoid the spaces under the trees," he informed her with a smile. "The birds love them."

She eyed him. "Maybe there should be signs? Or do you here at the station not want to be too welcoming?"

"Um, I don't think that's our motivation, ma'am. Are you looking for someone in particular? Or wanting to report a crime?"

"I'm looking for the Superintendent, Alan MacDonald."

Journalist? Rich local resident? She had an authoritarian air about her, so she could be a woman of privilege or some toff's wife. "He might be here. Take the lift to the third floor where you'll find the Super's suite he uses when he's in house. He makes the rounds to all the Rother Valley stations, though, and is often downtown, so it's a bit of a lottery, but you can at least leave him a message."

"A busy man, I suppose."

"Especially now. He's managing two posts."

"Yes, I know. Until the new DCI arrives. Thanks for the directions." She turned to go in. Matt eyed the glop. "Wait up. Let's take care of that mess first."

Right inside the main door where she was headed, the desk sergeant had bottles of water and paper towels, so a clean-up was possible and probably advisable before the bird shite dried.

"When I first arrived here, not long ago to be honest, I realized the landscapers had erred in their placement of all the new trees. The birds are generally around all year and feed on the scraps employees leave at the outside tables over there."

"Unintended consequences," she said, admiring their work on her auto. "But you're hinting that I should move the car?"

"I would do that now if I were you, ma'am. An expensive motorcar like this? You bet. I don't know what your business is here, but it's worth a few extra steps to keep your posh ride clean."

She smiled and nodded. "Thanks for the help and the advice, Inspector Cooper. Perhaps I'll see you inside."

Inspector Cooper? He'd never seen her before in his life. *Maybe she'd read about Chester Trent's case?* Because MPs had been involved, it had even made national media, without his photo, only the old commissioner's scowl that reminded Matt of an ex-US president's mug shot. But that was the only time his photo was ever in the local broadsheet, and the success in that case had been overshadowed by the scandal involving the old commissioner.

He pondered that as he made his way inside to meet with his team while she reparked. They were just beginning a drugs case—an old-style meth blitz, to be specific—a blast from the past that no one needed, especially Wath substation, which had no special narcotics division; its CID was a one-size-fits-all-cases establishment. Sometimes specialists were called in, but usually not, because funding and personnel cuts were still the order of the day even with the recent changes in the Sheffield constabulary's police administration.

He hoped the woman would at least find a uniformed constable who might listen to her problems. The old desk target might help there. He seemed to know all the tops and when they were on duty.

They were amid discussions about how to approach the meth case when the new Super called for Matt. He let DC Claire Walker take over the status meeting and headed up the stairs to avoid the lift and get some exercise. Because Matt had a chinwag with Alan only the day before, he was a bit puzzled about the request. Alan wasn't one to interrupt a meeting even as a DCI, although sometimes he'd attend. Matt, in fact, rightly assumed the DCI's main job was to serve as a buffer between the politicians, Supers and higher, and the officers who did the real work!

The woman whose car had been bird-bombed sat in one of Alan's guest chairs. She turned and smiled.

"Meet your new DCI," Alan said, "Janet Kirk."

"No relation to the captain," the woman said. "And my cat, whose name's Enterprise, isn't a starship."

He figured out the joke and smiled. "And for all the pests, human or otherwise, sometimes found in this old station, we don't have any troubles with Tribbles."

Alan looked from the new DCI to Matt and back. "Some inside joke?"

"Maybe before your time, sir. Just telly reruns now."

"Well, sit down for a moment. Janet wants to jump right into the foray, so I won't keep either of you too long. You can then take her down to meet your team." He eyed his DI. "Have you two met before?"

"Just now in the car park," Janet said. "I knew I was talking to Inspector Cooper. He had no idea who I was."

She offered a hand; he used it to help her up from the chair. As he guided her out the door with a light tap on the shoulder, he whispered, "Thank you for not mentioning the bird shite. If I'd known who you were, I'd probably cleaned it off all by myself. That couldn't have been a great welcome for you, ma'am."

"Just make sure you do your job, Inspector. I'm not one to tolerate loose cannons, even if they're experts at cleaning up a shite-storm, especially when they cause them."

Matt had to sit on his usual stool next to the case board and listen to Janet Kirk pontificate. While she didn't repeat the bad joke about her last name, she was trying too hard to impress the troops. He knew she wasn't succeeding from their dour expressions. He almost felt sorry for her: Trying to survive in the male-dominated world of policing was hard enough; attempting to do it by preaching down to a skilled group of coppers wasn't a road likely to lead to success.

And we have some real work to do, he thought. Most of her getting-to-know-you sermon about coppers' important roles in the community at large might be appropriate for recent academy graduates and others new to the station, but his tight team just wanted to get on with their cases like he did. He managed to maintain control and interest by occasionally nodding at certain platitudes contained in her blather and twaddle, a sign that he at least agreed with her words. He knew their patience was wearing thin, though. *A tough crowd*.

He wondered why the new administration had chosen this woman to be their DCI. The short bio he'd found by peeking surreptitiously at his phone wasn't very revealing, only indicating she'd been a DI in Liverpool.

"Do you want to add anything to what I've said, Inspector?" she asked him.

"Only that we've recently come through a bit of a rough patch, ma'am, so it's good of you to remind us all about why we do this work, why it's so important. We'll be getting into the

details of our pending cases, so you're welcome to stick around and listen. Might be a lot easier than reading my reports, I dare say." That generated a few laughs.

"I've decided the meth proliferation case is the most important item, but I know enough about it that I'd rather go get my office sorted so I have a place to work, if you don't mind."

"Of course. Welcome to Wath Station, Detective Chief Inspector."

There was a smattering of applause and even more smiles, but Matt thought that both might be from relief that she'd be gone. His competent team was used to Alan MacDonald, who might speak a few words to cheer them on, but usually let them loose on their various cases, only stepping in when pressure needed to be applied to his superiors for more funding or personnel, warrants from recalcitrant judges, and the rare disciplinary problem.

Why had Janet Kirk left Liverpool? Had she grown up in the Sheffield area and wanted to return to her home patch? He suspected that most of the team had done what he'd done: Search the web for information on her. There'd been a lot of mobile use while she'd prattled on and on. There hadn't been a lot of answers found by doing that in his case.

Matt could imagine storm clouds forming on the horizon, but it was only early days for the reign of DCI Janet Kirk.

The flood of meth hadn't produced a lot of drugs-related deaths yet—it was hard to get OD'd on the stuff, and most problems with the police occurred because crazy meth-heads did crazy things under meth's influence. Mixed with other shite, though, including some liquor and OTC drugs, it could become lethal. And there was always the chance that a meth lab would explode and injure or kill neighbors and first responders. That was a negative for the dealers too, of course.

It's advantage for dealers in illegal drugs, if it could be called that, was that they didn't necessarily have to worry about supply. They could make the damned stuff! Given the ingredients, a bit of equipment, and some knowledge of basic chemistry, the scrotes could produce the shite in large quantities. That made for popular prices.

The team's best bet was to find out who was producing the meth flooding the markets and where they were making it. *Easier said than done!* But it was an old drug, so there were many previous cases in both the UK and US where ideas for interdiction could be found.

There were several cases where shipments of meth had been confiscated, but successful prevention was a rarity while product was confiscated and arrests of dealers made after the fact. There was also the case of a recent bank robbery still on the books that seemed related; Matt believed it was to acquire funding for a meth lab somewhere. The sale of the drugs covered most of the valley, so it wasn't clear where its location might be.

They were getting nowhere fast. Matt knew it. Janet Kirk also knew it because she read his reports. She considered it their number one case, but he also had to deal with car thefts, home invasions, domestic disputes, and other crimes. Perhaps she thought that one big success would make her look good. He had too much pride to think that, so he worked his team hard.

Chapter Two

Kath and Tommy

Matt was a leader who tried to set a good example. How could he ask his team members to put in extra hours if he didn't? That was how he arrived late for a date with his sister Kath. They'd never been that close, but she'd been none too pleased with how her older brother tried to give her advice. He couldn't help it. Her life was a mess.

He walked out of the pub, leaving behind the irate young woman showing him her middle finger. They didn't agree about a lot of things, so he'd decided not to waste any more time on her.

His preachiness was easy to understand: He'd found out that she received the same advice from him that Lynne had given her later about having the abortion, but she'd told him where to stick it, not Lynne. Now she wanted to get back together with another loser and had told Matt where to stick it again. So, he'd left her there, not finishing his ale and hoping she choked on hers.

So much for sibling love! She was his only immediate family now, but their age difference and outlook on life both seemed like bricks in a wall between them most of the time. *And now I have to work with her!* If it weren't for Lynne, he'd ask for another transfer. It wasn't like Wath PD had been extremely welcoming to Matt Cooper!

He was angry, so he almost didn't spot the ghostly lad soon enough to brake when he darted out in front of his car waving his hands.

What quirk of fate has me braking for two nightwalkers in one week? He got out and approached the young man with wild hair and a ghostly appearance that matched his gray pajamas. That dirty golden hair was a bit too long, and his soft and expressive eyes were framed by long lashes. He was also barefoot. Matt decided the lad looked a bit effeminate but decided to reserve judgement.

"Many thanks for stopping, good sir. My name is Tommy. I need your help. My mum is dead."

More like the speech of a five-year-old who's watched too much telly, thought Matt, *but he's at least fifteen.* He then noticed the blood on one sleeve of the pajama tops.

"That your mum's blood, lad?"

"I tried to stop him. He grabbed me, but I broke loose and ran. He was coming after me with one of our kitchen knives."

"Who let that wanker in?"

"Mum. He was making his usual drugs delivery and wanted his money. Mum didn't have it. Please, come with me. I must give mum a proper burial."

There's something strange about this lad. "Okay. If you can direct me, let's take my car."

"May I ride with you then?"

"That's the idea, so you can tell me where to go." Matt noted the lad's confusion. "Just reverse your course to direct me back to your home, Tommy."

"Oh, right."

He took off the pajama top and was about to toss it when Matt stopped him. The timeline of the events wasn't that clear to Matt, but that bloody shirt could be evidence. "If he grabbed you, son, his DNA is there, not just your mum's blood. Let's assume that's the case."

"Deoxyribonucleic acid, human genetic material. Are you a policeman, good sir?"

“Yes, I’m a detective.” He went around the car and found an evidence bag in the boot large enough for the pajama top. He then made the lad get in. “Watch your feet, son.”

“I’m not your son. My father’s dead. My mum too.”

Matt shut the door—the lad had already snapped his seatbelt on and was staring ahead through the windscreen at how the flashing blues lit up the road by the time Matt slid into the driver’s seat.

“First time in a police car?” Matt asked.

“EV police cruiser from last year’s group.” He lowered his voice. ““We’re going green, folks, little by little. We must do our part to keep the planet safe.””

Matt recognized the excerpt from a speech made by the old commissioner, now in the gaol waiting to be tried for two murders. The Sheffield Constabulary had purchased a dozen EVs for the entire force five years earlier. They’d continued to update the fleet, so now even Wath had a half dozen. *This lad just saw his mother murdered and yet still remembers what Peter Grimes said in an interview back then?*

“Direct me to your house, Tommy.”

When they arrived and Matt saw the crime scene inside, he called it in.

Tommy had remained in the EV all that time, so eventually Matt went to sit with him until people started to show up. He asked a female PC to sit with the lad, making the request in a whisper for her to find out why Tommy was acting so strangely.

“Guess he’s in some kind of shock,” Matt said to her, “but it seems like more than that. For example, he enjoyed the ride in the squad car far too much, smiling like a tot who just got a new toy.”

“I’ll sit with him sir, but I’m no psych.”

“Just mother him a bit.” He saw her frown. “Okay, poor choice of words in many ways. I can have the pathologist talk to him. She used to be an ER doctor.”

“Lynne Bridges?” Matt nodded. “I didn’t know that. That’s an abrupt change of focus. From trying to keep people living to examining why they’re dead! What a change”

“Not material for the gossip mill, Constable. I’m just telling you so you don’t think I’m crazy when I ask Dr. Bridges to talk to Tommy.”

Tommy continued to be a useful witness. At the station, he had fun working with a police artist to obtain a sketch of Bob, his mum’s drugs supplier. After facial recognition software found five POIs as matches, the lad picked out one...and his name was Bob Finley. And when they put out a BOLO notice to pick up the scrote, he told the IT bloke how they could do that directly from the same computer where they’d found the scrote’s form.

“Who is this young fella?” Sal Garcia, the IT specialist, asked Matt. Sal had lived in the States, Italy, and France, but he was now a valued member of the Wath police force. “He doesn’t seem too affected by the loss of his mum. And he’s a feckin’ genius!”

“PC White thinks he’s autistic; Dr. Bridges agrees. Says he’s not an appropriate candidate for normal fostering placement and needs special care.”

“I’d hire him for our department, but he’s only fifteen.”

“Going on seven maybe. Very immature in any case. We’ll take care of him somehow. The poor fella’s all alone now.”

Matt was worried that correct help for the lad might not occur, though. He couldn’t imagine him in a foster home either, but anything might be better than a mother addicted to drugs! He wondered if Lynne knew someone who could help the lad.

And that worry about Tommy's life being defined by drugs until then reminded him that he had an invasion of meth dealers that needed his team's attention! He knew Janet Kirk would soon be after him. She'd already warned about making both the bank robbery and other meth-associated incidents cold cases because of their backlog. He'd countered by saying that he needed more people to handle the caseload but immediately regretted it. She only saw that as an excuse for incompetence, not that she did anything to remedy the personnel problem beyond complaining to Alan.

Matt decided to take advantage of a Sunday when Lynne wanted to do a lie-in; he wanted some peace and quiet to plan the next week's activities. Unfortunately, a call interrupted that planning. And his DCI's sixth sense for making his life miserable made her come in as well. She saw that Matt was in the open-plan area of his team and not in his office.

Chapter Three

Two Bored Detectives

"It's Sunday, Matt. You shouldn't be here."

"So, why are you here?"

"Damned monthly report needs to be written. It's a tradition I don't need."

Matt smiled. Alan must have forced Janet to continue it. *Good for him!* He'd like to think he'd have been able to move from DI to DCI without Alan forcing him to continue with that tedious bit of bureaucracy.

"I'm here because we've received a clue about the whereabouts of at least one meth lab." He wasn't about to tell her that clue had come from Daffy, the homeless young girl who gave him information in return for money she used for clothes and food. "I need another officer to ride with me, though. I'm a victim of my own rule: Two officers for a stake out or any other operation that might involve violence."

"That's a good rule." She eyed him, apparently considering more of a response. "I could volunteer for that. Seems like it should be more interesting than writing that report for the VIPs."

"Agreed, but I'll always deny I said that. And your company is welcome, I think, but I'll drive."

"Because you don't trust me at the wheel?"

"No, because I know the area better, that's all. I don't have an address to put in the GPS, but I have a general idea about where we must go. This isn't Liverpool, ma'am. You don't have the ocean blocking one side, for one thing. And Sir Paul and Sir Ringo aren't worshipped that much here, to be honest, so you won't be hearing retro music during the ride."

"Um, I believe there's an Abbey Road on the way to the park, though," she said with a smile. "Shall we make sure backup is available?"

He ignored her rebuttal and continued with his plans for the operation. "There's no danger where we're going. It's just a surveillance task. Better than report writing, as you say. Better hit the loo, though. We'll be heading into the countryside for a while, and you can't use a bottle."

"Or get behind a tree."

"No, that won't work for you either. The first thing the Normans did when they arrived here was clear the land for farming. Trees are scarce, more so than in Liverpool, at least where we're headed. Even in the park they've become scarce."

She was silent but still smiling as he steered the EV onto the main road that was filled with Sunday traffic going both ways. It was a lot more random on weekends too; most people weren't working.

He wondered if the smile was because she'd enjoyed the camaraderie. *Maybe she misses this kind of policework?* He would in her position. The police VIPs had done him a favor by not promoting him, that much was certain.

Chapter Four

The Farmhouse

"I met your sister the other day," Janet said after the two detectives had traveled for a few minutes. "She's quite a bit younger than you are."

Matt thought he might as well be honest. His relationship with Kath was in the toilet. "Most of the time, she's angry with the world except for her posting as a SOCO, which she loves. Can't blame her really. Mum always called her 'the accident,' which, to be honest, is quite insulting. And Dad would often tell her to be smart like me. Our parents aren't around anymore, so I'm her only target now. Sometimes I feel like telling her the funds for her last two years at college came from me, not from a fund set up by our parents, which is what she believes."

"Yes, that might make things worse. So, she started working as a SOCO right out of college?"

"Yes. I'll admit she's smarter than I am. Lives and breathes all that scientific shite. We enjoyed a détente for a while when I worked downtown, but now she must see a lot more of me with me here in Wath."

"She didn't strike me as that immature."

"More sibling rivalry than immaturity, I dare say. Typical crap. Families can have a lot of dysfunctions, I suppose."

"Mine ended with my divorce. The consolation is that I never have to see the bastard or his family again."

"That's too bad, ma'am. I miss my parents. Loneliness can be depressing at times." *Things are getting better with Lynne, though.* "Maybe you should try again? There are always other men. You might find them in church, on the golf course, at an amateur theater production, whatever. Do you play an instrument?"

"I don't need your advice, Inspector. I'm satisfied with my lot. And I'll have you know divorcees have it worse than widows, Matt: We're considered damaged goods. Moreover, I'm too old for you."

He turned red. "I wasn't—"

She dismissively waved a hand while she laughed. "Let's just stick to business. While your advice isn't all that bad, we've got a job to do, right?"

"Correct. To that end, let me summarize what we've learned."

He'd been thinking that in that little discussion she'd almost seemed human. *Maybe her divorce made her bitter?* Matt generally thought male plods to be the coppers who had trouble maintaining a healthy marriage, but that was sexist. Policework put pressure on all coppers. The females of the species could suffer from that problem as well. And they probably had to work harder at their jobs to have a successful career because policing was still dominated by men, some trying to hold them back. He would have to ask Lynne what she thought, but he had to admit that he was learning things about his job that the police academies never taught!

They soon turned off the main motorway. Matt had to slow down because the country lane's potholes and ruts were treacherous for the little patrol car. He also didn't want to cause a stir that could be heard all the way to their destination, although the low and nearly silent whir of the electric motor helped prevent detection.

At one point, he braked and backed up. "We're close. I'll pull off the road at that last lay-by we passed. I believe we can hide this puny car behind the hedgerow and walk the rest of the way. Okay with you, ma'am?"

"I'm wearing my trainers. I'm never a fashion plate, especially on weekends."

"Practicality is the police officer's friend." He found the torch; they might need it later in the failing light. They each checked the bars on their mobiles. He had three; she had two. *Mine's the newer phone*, he thought.

"We're all set. Off we go to see the Wizard of Oz."

They walked in silence about three lengths of a soccer field and then turned off the lane to enter a smaller one that he knew would wind around a hill to a farmhouse with several outbuildings. Daffy had told him she'd kitted out in one of them, the farthest to the rear, just a convenient place to get out of the rain on her way to snoop around that huge, new shopping mall under construction she'd been curious about. Matt thought that sometime in the future all the farms in the area would be swallowed up by urban sprawl until only boxy look-alike little houses and huge shopping centers would remain. That was now called progress. It was well that there was a national park on the other side of Sheffield Center that protected at least one side of the Sheffield conurbation from that fate.

Daffy had said she'd awoken to the noise made by several old lorries. She thought they loaded up in the barn, only to leave again. Considering that the farm looked abandoned, that had surprised her, so his snout had mentioned it to Matt.

"Just another abandoned farm," Janet observed as they peered from behind an old stone wall. "Besides bugs and weeds, not many living things around, to put a fine point on it."

"You might be right." Daffy's information was usually good, but she was only human. Still, he could see lots of tread marks in the dried mud of the barnyard. That partially confirmed her tale. "I suppose we should just return to the car and go around the other way to make a pleasant Sunday ride out of a failed op. There's—"

"Wait!" Janet pointed. "There are some people in the farmhouse, and the barn door is opening."

They watched as an old mud-spattered Rover exited the old barn. It passed less than twenty yards from them. Two men were inside.

"I'm for texting our desk sergeant and asking him to send out an ARO as backup," Matt whispered to Janet.

"Let's just maintain surveillance for now. Although the activity here looks a bit suspicious, I don't yet see anything illegal going on."

Matt was regretting that he'd brought her along, but those thoughts were interrupted when his phone pinged at that point; he cursed but looked at it. "Response to my inquiry about the Rover's plates: 'Tis stolen. Is that enough for you?"

"Send a BOLO out to that effect. I still want to wait to see more about what's going on here at the farm."

With the barn door open now, they could see more activity within, the inside lit by some bare bulbs. There was certainly more than in the farmhouse.

"My gut feeling is that they're cooking up meth in there, ma'am."

"Maybe. But we can't do anything about it, can we? It's Sunday. How long would it take to organize an ARO and have it arrive here to help?"

"The longer we wait to text the sergeant, the longer it will take."

“And you’re willing to risk a scandalous expose about police incompetence from a hostile media just to satisfy your paranoid suspicions?”

He glared at her and then shrugged. “You’re the boss. I don’t have to worry about hostile media; you do. And I already have the rep of being a loose cannon.”

He’d said that with a smile, a bit twisted, and she reacted badly. “Exactly! And part of my job is to control prats like you!”

“Keep your voice low, ma’am. Whoever’s here at this farm, they’re probably not deaf. And your angry and shrill voice will carry far in this breeze.”

“Angry, yes, but shrill? Shrill?” Her expression was all he needed to know she was about to lose it, but she calmed down soon enough. “We’ll discuss this back at the station in my office.”

“Whatever. You wanted to come along for—”

She turned and saw what he’d seen: A thug with a thick beard and bushy eyebrows pointed an automatic rifle in their direction. They could only raise their hands.

Chapter Five

Captives

They were ushered towards the farmhouse. Part way there, two other scruffy thugs came out of the barn and accompanied them. They looked familiar. As they walked towards the farmhouse, Matt remembered where he'd seen them: They were Elaine Frost's brother and cousin. And all three had the *OCF* tattoos! *Small world*, he thought. *Was drugs trafficking financing some OCF activities?* He decided that the Home Office might want to know about that!

They entered the farmhouse. Another thug was inside—Matt didn't recognize him, but he'd probably been the yob they'd espied inside before—and the first three turned them over to him, who forced the two detectives to go inside a small room. The door was locked behind them.

"I'm sorry," Janet said.

Matt glanced at her. "For what?"

"Yelling at you. They probably overheard me."

"Or the ping from my mobile. I was stupid not to put it on mute. Or they visually detected us. Someone in that barn's loft probably acting as a sentry, for example. Whatever. Our situation is more dire because I now can't call for an ARU."

She walked over and perched atop a shipping crate, swinging her legs. "You know, Matt, they'll probably have mobiles, I bet. Our guard has one. I doubt his genitals are square and fill his pocket." She smiled. "And what good drugs trafficker would be without his phone?"

That got a chuckle from him. "Think we can just ask him for his? He didn't look very friendly as he kissed the other three's arses."

"Obsequious because he's low in the ranks, I suppose. What do you think they have planned for us?"

"Best scenario: We're left here to rot. Worst one: We're murdered and chopped up to feed the pigs."

"There are pigs here? I haven't seen one farm animal."

"Just a figure of speech, ma'am. We might be awaiting our execution, in other words. These yobs mean business. They're probably well-equipped if their weapons are any indication and have probably had a lot of practice murdering people."

She frowned. "Will they torture us?"

"I doubt it, but probably you'd be the more likely candidate than me. You can bet they consider women the weaker sex, so they'll think you're more likely to tell them if we reported in on our mobiles. Which we no longer have, as you implied, but they can't get into them, thank goodness. Otherwise, they'd know we didn't call and maybe we'd be dead already."

She shuddered upon hearing that convoluted opinion but patted the crate next to her. "Come and take the load off. We're two smart coppers, Matt. We should be able to come up with some plan. Defeatism *is not* acceptable."

"You could have been a good cheerleader for a football squad, ma'am, in another life, of course." He took a seat on the crate and thought a moment. "With this locked room, they're confident that only one guard outside the door is sufficient. There are two of us, though, as you stated, so we could overpower him if we can get him to come and pay us a visit. How do we do that?"

“No idea.” They continued to mull over their predicament, but then she said, “I have an idea.”

“Let’s hear it. I’ve got nothing.”

He listened to her suggestion, and they agreed to add a few bells and whistles. Everything depended on whether their guard cared about a prisoner dying on his watch. Matt could only hope the burly ape who was their guard was as dumb as he looked, only muscle who could just as well have been a robot, although the latter might be a lot more intelligent.

They agreed that the barn had to be the location of the meth lab, if that was indeed what was going on, so maybe the bloke in the farmhouse now with them wasn’t trusted to help in the meth prep, a more delicate operation than the simple chore of guarding an old woman and a bumbling detective.

“Act One, Scene One, of this very short play coming up,” he told her after their plan’s details were complete.

DCI Janet Kirk went into acting mode: She sprawled on the floor and began to moan and groan while clutching at her right side.

Matt pounded on the door, yelling, “Help out there! The old woman’s having some kind of attack! I think it’s her appendix or gall bladder!”

He put his right ear to the door and covered the left with his left hand to mute Janet’s very believable cries of pain. That allowed him to hear the guard’s approaching footsteps and step aside in time.

There was a rattling of keys, and the thug came through the doorway. Matt rendered him unconscious with an illegal chokehold, legality be damned considering their captor had a gun.

“Take off his belt and bind his hands behind his back,” Matt said to Janet as he took the S&K from the guard’s back waistband and removed a switchblade from his pocket. “Then take off his shoes and stuff a sock in his mouth.”

“He might suffocate.”

He smiled; that chokehold might have killed the yob too. “We’ll risk it, ma’am.”

Matt was soon looking out the farmhouse’s front windows, surveilling the situation and thinking about their next tactics, when Janet exited and locked the door behind her. “All set?” She nodded. “Any ideas for how we should proceed?”

“Depends on what you see out there. Where are they? I heard lorries when we were in our planning session.”

“I heard them too. I’m guessing they’re still in the barn and the gang is now packing up all the product and lab equipment. They’ll be coming for us soon.”

She peeked out the window on the other side of the front door from him. “One gang member is in the barn’s loft serving as sentry. He’s got a rifle, Matt.”

“Aye, saw that wanker. Might have been the one who spotted us before.” Matt raised the pistol. “It’d be a difficult shot from here with this.”

“And eliminating him wouldn’t rid us of the others. We’re outnumbered.” She showed him the guard’s mobile. “Even if we knew the password, it’s only got one bar.”

“We can send some text messages with that, though. Let me see the phone.” He examined it. “You can get in with the guard’s finger. Up to doing that?”

She nodded. “Of course. Even if he’s conscious now. I just hope I didn’t cinch the belt so tightly that it cut off his circulation.”

“Might not matter. Do your best while I continue to assess our situation outside. I have almost a full magazine here. I should at least be able to create some chaos.”

She reentered the room, and he continued to study the farmyard and its associated buildings. He decided C-4 or some other explosive would have been more useful than the pistol. He knew that a meth lab could make a big bang with just a little bit of explosive ordinance to help it along.

He then spotted the propane tank at the left side of the barn door. *I wonder....*

She returned and peered over his shoulder. “You’re tense and focused. Do you have a brilliant plan?”

“Its brilliance might be questionable. It’s a long shot...and that’s a bad pun. Let me tell you about Plan B first.”

“Go ahead.”

She was probably surprised he had two plans. “Plan B is simple: Both of us must exit this house and run like hell, you to the right and I to the left. Hopefully one of us can shake them.”

“I’m not a fan of your Plan B. I’m a jogger, Matt, not someone who’s any good at emulating Usain Bolt doing a dash.”

Full of trivia references, he thought, recalling her playing around with her last name. “Did you manage to send at least one text message?”

“Three, to Alan, Claire, and Dewi. I had them on speed dial along with you. I hope at least one of them is paying attention.”

“Maybe all of them, because they’re all missing your sweet personality?”

“I guess I deserved that.”

“Never mind. Let’s assume one of them is sending an ARU to save us. We must hold our own until they get here. You’ll only have to get to the main road, hide, and wait for them. Same for me at the next farm over. A bit farther for me than you if memory serves, but I’m a bit speedier than you are, I dare say.”

“So, Plan B, no matter how iffy, is settled. I hope Plan A is better.”

“It will be more difficult but without running for our lives. Let me get your reaction.”

Chapter Six

The Shot

Janet convinced Matt to go for Plan A, and, if it wasn't a success, they'd move immediately on to Plan B.

He eyed the sentry in the loft.

"It's a difficult shot with just a damn pistol," she said.

"I know that, ma'am. But I absolutely must eliminate the wanker, or we won't be able to use Plan B."

"When was the last time you visited the range?"

"About a month ago. I did well if memory serves. But am I good enough?"

"I know you'll do well now too."

He smiled at her. "Hooray for the team! I appreciate your cheerleader's confidence in my shooting skills. I'm not an ARO, though. And I don't particularly like guns."

"Trust me, you don't want me to try to make that shot."

He laughed now. *What the hell? It wouldn't be the first time that two antagonistic and stubborn plods came together to save the day!*

He sat on a kitchen chair and steadied the gun on the windowsill. "Trainers' laces well tied in preparation for Plan B?"

She nodded. "We're not going to need Plan B, though. You can do it, Matt."

He took a deep breath, exhaled, and fired. The rifle fell out of the loft to the ground, and the sentry fell back into the darkness behind him.

He then took aim at the top of the propane tank, a much smaller target but at least not an elevated one. After four more shots, it flew off. A final shot made it explode. The whole side of the barn became engulfed in flames.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Janet said. "It's a feckin' meth lab!"

"Agreed. Let's go say hi to our prisoner. Now!"

They had just slammed the door to the little room that had been their prison when the tank's explosion was easily dwarfed by the barn's.

Most of the farmhouse ended up in ruins. A roof support had impaled their prisoner, just missing Matt. Janet and Matt slithered out from the ruins, moved to the front, and looked out the blown-out windows to see the barn still in flames.

"Fire and ice," Janet said.

He glanced at her. "I know that comes from some poem, but stop the trivia, will you? Do you think we need SOCOs?"

She smiled. "Probably not. And your girlfriend would probably waste her time here as well. COD and TOD are as clear as can be."

Girlfriend? Damn, she'd tapped into the team's gossip!

They found two pails they could use as stools to rest their weary bones while they waited. Some twenty minutes later a crowd paid them a visit—uniforms, detectives, SOCOs, and Lynne and her helper.

"Took you long enough," Matt said to Dewi.

The DC shrugged. "We had to figure out where you two might be. Dr. Bridges was frantic. You'd told her you were going somewhere to buy a farm. That can have several meanings, at least one very dark that worried her a lot."

“And I didn’t know how to use the locator on our guard’s phone,” Janet said.

“And she doesn’t know the area,” Matt said. “That’s on me. So how did you find us?”

“The explosion was so loud that Nessie probably heard it all the way up in Scotland in her loch.”

Janet winked at Matt. “And you think my obsession with trivia is bad. That metaphor is terrible.”

“I’ll make sure Dewi works on that.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Seven

Young Recruits

The cases of the bank robbery and numerous meth sales were now solved. Janet made a name for herself by appearing in newspapers from local broadsheets to the *Times* and giving interviews on radio and telly, including the BBC. A few times, Alan accompanied her, but Matt always ignored the publicity. He had a few promises he'd made to himself to keep.

Lynne had known someone who could help Tommy. She'd studied with Dr. Jacob Eisberg, and he'd briefly worked with Tommy before. The good doctor couldn't do much for him at that time because the lad's mother had insisted that a normal school was good enough for her son if it had been good enough for her. With her passing, both a tragedy and a blessing for Tommy, in Matt's opinion, and with the help of the authorities, including Dr. Lynne Bridges and DI Matthew Cooper, Tommy now could stay at Eisberg's institute during the week and spend weekends with either Bridges or Cooper. (Jacob probably suspected that sometimes the weekends involved both, but he didn't much care.)

Tommy flourished in that arrangement and improved even more when the Wath PD's IT department offered an unpaid internship to the lad (unpaid for Tommy but some funding for Eisberg's institute). The lad continued to impress Silas.

That was how Matt came to see him late one afternoon seemingly staring at screens in a trance. On Tommy's small worktable there sat three computers, and now the lad typed on one keyboard with his left hand and another with his right.

"What's he doing?" Matt said to Silas in a whisper.

Silas took Max aside, a bit farther away from the mesmerized hacker. "Damned if I understand it, but he had this idea that he could link all the ANPR cams in the area and search their video records for a particular plate or make or model of a car all at one and the same time."

"Sounds complicated."

"'Tis. But he tried it out in a small experiment. He had to write some faster C++ routines to make it all work, but those can manage a larger number of cameras and dataset easily enough. So, he says."

"That might be useful elsewhere," Matt said with a nod.

"Damn right! In fact, the Home Office would probably give him millions of pounds for it if he wasn't developing it for us. He doesn't seem to care about fame or money, though. He just sees it as a lot of fun time."

Matt glanced at Tommy again. "He's like those autistic musicians, except his instrument is a computer, not a piano."

"Computers. You've maybe seen someone play two pianos at once, a hand on each keyboard. He can multitask like that and get things done two or three times as fast, even discounting how fast he thinks."

"Make sure he takes a break now and then. He's lost in his own world now. He needs to come back into ours from time to time."

Daffy was the next teen who needed some attention, and Lynne helped there as well.

"I had a chinwag with Daffy. She's a fascinating and wild creature."

"Any luck in taming that wildness?"

Lynne winked at him. "She covets your body, Matthew."

"I write that off as teenage infatuation, her version of dreaming about bedding some rock star or much-admired teacher."

"Maybe you've encouraged that attraction because she's a good informant?"

"She comes to me when she has information to trade for a few pounds. She doesn't like bad men, so I must represent something good in her squalid life."

"I emphasized the danger involved in living like that. And she's exposing herself even more to bad men by informing on them, you know."

"I realize that. I can't convince her to change her lifestyle. Can you?"

"We talked about a lot of things. She was more interested in my life as an ER doctor. I tried to convince her that could be a possible future for her. She's an intelligent woman. Or, maybe a nurse, if she doesn't want to wait so long. She wants to work with addicts in any case, for obvious reasons. We agreed to keep talking. I think now it's more for the food and drink, but it might eventually result in some real change in her life."

"Go for it. I think she's worth saving."

The cases kept coming. With Janet under Alan's thumb and somewhat under control, Matt's team could handle most of the work that came their way. The one personal problem remaining was Kath. He found out that she'd decided on her own to break up with the lout she'd been seeing. That also ended up improving their sibling rivalry: She and Sam Trout became an item!

Matt's life was more pleasant now even if it was busier. He decided that was okay if he could avoid distractions from his policework due to politics. Both Janet and Andy helped with that now, Kirk's acerbic nature having considerably mellowed to the point where he could almost call her a friend.

Changes would come, of course. One loomed on the horizon: Lynne wanted to try to get pregnant. Matt didn't know if he was ready to be a father, though, and she wasn't completely sure about becoming a mother either. And shouldn't they get married before making that decision? They'd both seen from their work lives that people failed a lot as parents. Maybe they'd just have to stumble along and learn by doing and do the best they could like the rest of the world who responsibly brought children into the world!

Note from Steve

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Rogue Planet***

***Bridge books between series, the last novel provides a bridge to the Dr. Carlos stories found in several collections (see below) and A. B. Carolan's third sci-fi mystery for young adults, *Mind Games*.

The following novels are independent from our others...

“The Last Humans”

The Last Humans

A New Dawn: The Last Humans: Book Two

Menace from Moscow: The Last Humans, Book Three

“Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries”

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About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the US and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the US, for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> or follow him on Twitter, where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.