



Esther Brookstone and the Art Forgers An “*Esther Brookstone Art Detective*” Novella

Steven M. Moore



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SAMPLE

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Summary

Esther Brookstone might have started her professional life filled with many adventures as a spy for MI6 (SIS) in East Berlin during the Cold War, posing as a well-educated and well-endowed fraulein who could tempt Stasi agents, but she's better known in England for her work as an inspector in the Art and Antiques Division Scotland Yard; she knew her art, to put a fine point on it.

You might have read about her authentication of Rembrandt, Botticelli, and Klimt paintings and her restoration skills in several stories. One acquires those appraisal abilities from education, both formal and informal, and practice. This is a story about one of her cases where she asks a criminal and others help in solving more than an art heist.

Note: Please be advised that this case takes place in those days before the Yard used DNA, cellphones, or the internet. It's also a prequel for the "Esther Brookstone Art Detective" series that begins with *Rembrandt's Angel*.

British, Scotch, and Irish Words and Phrases

Note from Steve: Just like the US has Bostonian and Texas dialects, the UK and the Republic of Ireland also have regional dialects. I tried to include here all the expressions appearing in the novel, but I might have missed a few...or included a few extras from previous novels in the series? And English and Irish readers, please don't hold it against this Yank if my definitions aren't one hundred percent correct. While I might be responsible for some errors, Google and Microsoft Word were willing accomplices!

A

aggro—aggravation, discomfort

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

ARO—Armed Response Officer (like a SCO19 member)

ARU—Armed Response Unit (also sometimes called SCO19)

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

Auld Reekie—Edinburgh, Scotland

B

barney—heated argument or verbal skirmish

barrister—lawyer who can participate in a trial (defense or prosecution)

beck—creek, small river

biro—ballpoint pen (named after its inventor)

blaggard—scoundrel

blather—talk, often without rhyme or reason for the person listening

bloke—fellow, guy

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

bollix—bungle

bollocks—general swear word (literally, testicles)

boot—car trunk

brae—a steep bank or hillside

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

C

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

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

chap—fellow, guy

chappie—fellow, guy

chat up—flirt with someone

chinwag—chat, conversation, discussion

CID—Criminal Investigative Department within a police station

chuffed—pleased

cock-up—disaster, fiasco

copper—policeman or policewoman

crisps—potato chips

D

DS—Detective Sergeant

DC—Detective Constable

DI—Detective Inspector

DCI—Detective Chief Inspector

do an early dart—leave the workplace or an event early

do a runner—flee, disappear

donkey's years—a long time

dosh—money (wad of bills)

droll—boring, irrelevant

duty solicitor—legal representation provided to a suspect by the police or court

E

eejit—fool

F

fag—cigarette

feckin'—not as strong as the American version, and also used to emphasize

fiver—five-pound note

FLO—family liaison officer

fuggy—warm, stuffy, smoky (of a room, atmosphere, or mind)

G

give stick—beat up, verbally or physically

gobshite—mean or contemptible person

gobsmacked—astonished, astounded (a “gob” is a wad of tobacco)

goolies—testicles

GP—General Physician

grass on—rat on, snitch on, tattle

H

hire-car—rental car

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

I

Iron Lady—Margaret Thatcher

K

kerb-crawler—prostitute (curb in the US)

knackered—exhausted

L

do a lie-in—sleep late

loo—bathroom, WC

lorry—truck

lose his rag—get furious

M

marra—mate, friend (Cumbrian dialect)

mash—tea brewed from tea leaves, not tea bags

mobile—cellphone or smart phone

monkeys—500-pound notes

MP—member of parliament

N

nappies—diapers

nick—steal, arrest (as a verb); police station, jail (as a noun)

niggling—trifling, annoying

nippers—children
numpty—stupid or foolish person
nutter—crazy person

O

old chestnut—adage or saying

P

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

pillock—fool

pish-tosh—only a trifle

plonker—fool

plod—copper

PM—prime minister

prat—a stupid or foolish person

publican—manager or owner of a pub

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

R

rozzar—copper

rugger—rugby player

S

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

scarper—flee

scrote—lowlife

scrum—disorderly crowd (or a pile of rugby players)

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

skelping—unusually large or outstanding

SIO—Senior Investigating Officer

SOCO—Scene of Crime Officer (US CSI)

sod—annoying person (noun); deprecate or disparage (verb): Sod it!

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

stunner—pretty girl or woman

T

takeaway—fast food the buyer picks up

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

taking the piss—(see immediately above)

tam—a Scottish hat

tearaway—urchin

telly—television

tipple—imbibe an alcoholic beverage, or the beverage itself

tippler—habitual drinker

toe-rag—urchin

toff—aristocrat, or member of the privileged elites

tops—bobbies (for their helmets)

trainers—sneakers (US East Coast) or tennis shoes (US West Coast)

trawl—search

tuck in—more for eating than for going to bed

twaddle—nonsense

twit—foolish or stupid person

twitcher—birdwatcher

W

wag—a person given to droll, roguish, or mischievous humor

wanker—a contemptible person, scoundrel, villain

wellies—overshoes

wing mirror—side mirror of car (as opposed to rearview mirror)

wrinklies—elderly people

Y

yob—rude or aggressive person

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Security Agencies

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

British national crime agency—National Crime Agency (NCA)

British internal security—MI5

British external security—MI6 (SIS)

Bundespolizei—national police in both Austria and Germany

Chinese internal and external security—Ministry of State Security (MSS)

French internal security—DGSI (previously Surete)

French external security—DGSE (previously Surete)

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

Russian internal security—FSB (previously KGB)

Russian external security—SVR (previously KGB)

US internal security—ATF, DEA, DHS, FBI

US external security—CIA, sometimes FBI

Notes: The Metropolitan Police, also called “the Met” or “the Yard” (for Scotland Yard, a name that’s used for both the Met and the City of London Police), and their affiliates represent the general policing organizations for England and Wales; it covers general crime throughout the region with its many divisions, including Esther’s old Art and Antiques Division; but it also covers background checks and crimes associated with the Official Secrets Act (the old Special Branch) and railroad terminals and some local airports. Individual cities' police departments are now considered part of the overall system (e.g., Reading PD).

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

MI5 and MI6 were created during World War II (the MI stands for “Military Intelligence”).

The National Crime Agency was also created in 2013 as part of the general reform to lead efforts against organized crime, including sex- and drug-trafficking.

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

Cast of Main Characters

Steven Aldridge—rich industrialist and art connoisseur
Willy Baumgarten—German gang leader
Esther Brookstone—Detective Inspector in Scotland Yard’s Art and Antiques Division
Franz Clauberg—art forger and art thief
Josef Clauberg—Franz’s uncle
Yuri Dragunov—Russian embassy’s scientific attaché local SVR head
Thornton “Thor” Drake—professional assassin
Jaime Flores—Detective Sergeant working with Esther
Maria Flores—Jaime’s wife
Otto Jensen—owner of a Copenhagen art gallery
Caitlin Harris—Detective Constable working with Esther
Vincent Hoph—art history professor and consultant for the Van Gogh Museum
George Langston—Detective Chief Inspector and Esther’s current boss
Michael McKenny—Detective Constable working with Esther
John Rawlins—Scotland Yard Detective Inspector
Frank Romano—art forger and art thief
Dietrich Schmidt—Imperial College molecular chemistry professor
Sofia Schultz—Josef’s personal nurse
Ambreesh Singh—MI5 technical wizard
Toby Smythe—reformed art forger and art thief
Wolfgang Suhr—aka Reginald Matthewson; art forger, art thief, and gallery owner
Patty Townes—John Rawlins’s Detective Sergeant
Bastiann van Coevorden—Interpol agent
Gretchen Weiss—Josef Clauberg’s sister

Preface

Unlike the novels in the “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” series, I didn’t serve as Esther’s chronicler for this novella that precedes them in time. As a bit of skullduggery to drive reviewers nuts, that honor goes to author Declan O’Hara who writes mostly mystery and crime stories and has several cameos (some quite extended) sprinkled through several stories often involving Esther. He’s also a good friend of Ricardo Silva, the artist, whose paintings are often featured in Esther’s London gallery.

Declan asked me to write this preface, though, and I was happy to oblige. After reading the novella, I can see that it’s more a police procedural, not unlike his mystery and crime stories. It’s attraction for readers might very well be the insights it provides as a prequel to the novels, though, because you will meet many of the characters in those novels, including of course that crime-fighting duo of Esther Brookstone and her Dutchman, Bastiann van Coevorden. That might hint of the adventures to come, but, like the novels, this story can stand alone.

I hope you enjoy this adventure as much as I did!

George Langston
London, England

Prologue

Munich, Germany

Franz Clauberg passed through the door with the broken keypad and surveyed the little room in his uncle's old house. Josef's "lucky seven" paintings had now been reduced to six, the missing one's space obvious on the old plaster wall between the three hung on each side.

Josef's father, Franz's grandfather, had managed to save those small art pieces painted by seven different nineteenth-century masters before they became famous. Just before the war, the family had fled from Vienna to a small town in Austria where they'd hid from the Nazis along with the paintings. After the war, his uncle and a few other family members had moved to Munich, preferring their old ancestral home even with its bad memories of the Nazis' rise to power that had begun there.

Franz well remembered the little van Gogh—no riot of colors nor swirls, just a still-life in earth tones. That painting, as well as the other six not stolen, had been authenticated but not appraised; in a sense, like many masterworks, they might even be considered priceless now.

"That old fool!" Franz said to his uncle's nurse Sofia standing behind him. "Of all people, Josef should have listened to me. I know for certain a simple lock controlled by a keypad won't stop a professional thief! No art museum would ever them in such a way."

The woman laughed, more at his comments than at the situation that had left her charge so despondent. "Old people can become very stubborn. He's been through a lot, Franz, enough in his life that he's been blessed with more good luck than most."

"Ergo his name for the seven," Franz said, his hand now indicating the six left. "*Ja*, I know. But one's luck can run out. The thief could have killed him if he awoke."

"Why do you think the thief only stole the van Gogh?"

It was Franz's turn to laugh, "That's obvious to this old art thief: It's how we usually work. Some rich bastard covets a painting and specifically requests that it be stolen for him, that one particular piece, no other. Simple supply and demand. That article in the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* two years ago mentioned my uncle's 'lucky seven' collection, specifically the van Gogh. Most of Europe that knows anything about art probably knew what he had here."

She sighed. "You move in those circles. Can't you find the thief and recover the painting?"

"The thief doesn't really matter now. I must find the bastard who stole the painting."

Chapter One

A Mansion in the London Suburbs

Although Esther Brookstone's Jaguar didn't look out of place as she pulled into an oversized car park long ago used for buggies and carriages, she silently asked the stately shade trees to give her vehicle some protection—she loved her avian friends, but they often attacked her motor's shiny blue finish. She made the tentative conclusion that the owner of the Victorian monstrosity she was visiting was probably some Tory toff who should pay more taxes. A stiff breeze was coming off the Thames, there but not seen in the ubiquitous fog, so Esther finger-combed her dampened tresses before the butler answered the door.

As a lifetime Labour party supporter despite the rest of her family's political proclivities, her father the vicar even trending toward fascism—he might have felt right at home among the ayatollahs—she had little use for the Queen and all her parasitic family and even less for the so-called “peers,” a class that included most members of the House of Lords. Being a professional copper, though, who'd risen to the level of detective inspector, she'd now have to mentally file away her personal prejudices and just do her job.

The tall and slender whom people might have mistaken for one of her irascible brothers answered the door and then ushered her into a library with an area twice that of Esther's own two-bedroom flat. Those two older siblings and she were basically strangers now who only exchanged Christmas cards if they even managed to remember to send them. During the short walk through the house to the library, she'd decided her initial appraisal was correct, that this toff had far too much money, so much so that he didn't have to resort to the tactics of other toffs owning such posh residences, even some in the peerage: Show part of their property to the general public.

She patted her tresses again. Her auburn curls didn't yet show any gray. Her perky girls, thin but not waspy waist, and shapely hips made even her serious gray business suit she called a “policewoman's special” look flattering. Her maroon belt and matching sensible pumps finished off the look of a sophisticated working woman who might be amenable to a night out on the arm of a rich man if he was suitably charming. Three men had thought about such programs and their lustier extrapolations; they'd taken her to the altar. Regrettably, they'd all passed on. Other women might believe she'd put a curse upon them, but those would be women who didn't know Esther well: She was more practical than such a woman who often pursued a bloke only because he had a pension and a pulse. She still thought along the lines that would have embarrassed her conservative and staid father: If the Good Lord wanted her to have a lot of love in her life, she wasn't going to argue with Him about it. One only had one life to live! That had been husband number three's maxim essentially; he'd been an atheist.

She took a seat in a conversation area encircling the library's fireplace and waited for the mansion's owner, Steven Aldridge. Her impatience grew, so she decided to inspect the library's contents. She took a first edition of *The Tale of Two Cities* off the shelf and opened it. The pages crackled. *Never opened*, she thought. *They're just investments for this plonker!*

The butler returned, though, to interrupt her admiration of the artwork and books spread around the room; he apologized for the delay. “The master will join you in a moment, Inspector Brookstone.”

She sat down again, wondering if her status was too low to be seen elsewhere in the house. Mr. Aldridge wasn't accumulating positive points as far as she was concerned. For that matter, neither was his butler. When the master of the house arrived, there was barely a nod of

greeting. He led her through a side door into what could only be called an art gallery. Unlike the books and paintings in the library next to it, she could see the paintings in the side room were even more valuable.

“There it is!” he said, still without any formal greeting. “You see!”

She saw a small painting that had ketchup splashed on it, some having dripped down on a carpet that probably cost more than her year’s salary, not to mention the cost of the painting or even thinking about the other paintings in the room. *Well, what do you expect? she thought. If it’s valuable, it should be in a climate-controlled room and locked up, not exposed to the Old Smoke’s damp and polluted air or overly dry atmosphere from the mansion’s century-old heating system.* She then chided herself. He couldn’t be that stupid. The gallery, of course, and maybe even the library, could probably be sealed off and climate-controlled; she just didn’t see any evidence for it.

“You must find the criminal who did this! I can offer a reward for his apprehension. What else can I do?”

Being a practical detective, she’d come prepared. She was examining the van Gogh with both a jeweler’s loupe and a larger magnifying glass and uttering some appropriate “tsk-tsks.” She made no reply to Aldridge’s rant, though. She had her reasons.

One, she had little use for toffs who purchased artwork to inflate their egos by bragging about their purchases and making sure that others would envy them as the only persons who could view the paintings. When it came down to the nitty-gritty, that’s what kept the illegal art trade and illegal art traffickers going. Some rich prat might even pay someone to steal a painting the prat coveted!

Two, Aldridge, like many art collectors, probably knew next to nothing about art. His small van Gogh was a nice little study of a dry-flower-and-ripe-fruit display, a curiosity not at all characteristic of the mad-artist’s later style. (She never could believe that wild Dutchman had cut off his own ear, although she supposed Beethoven could have made good use of it. She wanted to replace the latter’s glowering bust on her piano one day. Now she had to put a doily over that angry German countenance when she played.)

Steven Aldridge, CBE for Lord-knows-what, awaited her comments. He was standing with hands on hips like some Dickensian twit. Far shorter than Esther and rather egg-shaped, Humpty-Dumpty style, if one were honest, his three-piece suits must be tailor-made; their proportions would never be found on a store’s rack no matter how posh the store. His shoes were spotless and shiny Italian imports; he’d have to stand in front of a full-length mirror to see them, of course, because he’d never be able to otherwise with his fat belly blocking his view. Although the twit lacked a monocle, he reminded her of the iconic banker of that Yankee game she found so boring and such a waste of time.

Yes, I must comment in a way he won’t find to be too insulting. “I believe I’d have added a dash of mayonnaise and Dijon mustard, sir,” she said. “Just for color variety, you know.” She dipped her index finger in the nearly dry ketchup and sucked her finger. “At least that has some zing to it, not at all like those bland American imports that so many people use to ruin their chips. Good old apple vinegar is so much better on them, you know.”

Aldridge spluttered. “You’re tampering with the evidence!”

“My dear sir, you’ve already done that by not sealing off this room and the neighboring library. And leaving the doors open precludes any attempt to maintain a constant and proper climate control. Fog has blown in from the Thames as it often does. Just look out the window.”

Aldridge by then had become beet red as he tried to control his anger. Esther decided to end her fun. It wouldn't do for a visiting police inspector to cause a crime victim to have a heart attack or stroke, and Aldridge certainly could be a candidate for either one given the appropriate stimuli.

"Even I could restore this painting, sir," she said, "so your worries are unfounded."

"It's still a crime what's been done to my painting! I want you to find the criminal who did this."

She couldn't resist. "Might not be a criminal, I dare say. It could be someone who doesn't like early van Gogh." While the redness in his face now deepened, she thought a moment. "It's a slow time in the division right now, so here's what I can do for you, Aldridge: First, I must sit down with you and share a nice brandy while you give me all the details you know: When you left for your holiday in Italy; when you returned; when, where, and from whom you purchased the painting; etc.; etc. Second—which might be interchanged with the first, depending on our schedules; mine's rather busy—I'll send some of our forensics people here to go over this whole house. They'll need your fingerprints and those of anyone else who frequents the residence. Third, you must find a reputable gallery—I can make several good recommendations if you don't know any—that will clean and restore your painting and make it shipshape again. I could do it, like I said, but I know I won't have the time. Finally, I'd like to take the painting to have a friend honestly appraise it."

His expression couldn't be much angrier as he sputtered, "That last is out of the question! It's absurd and unnecessary. I have a policy that covers the painting; an appraisal was required to obtain it. And it was purchased from a reputable gallery in Denmark."

"You're quite incorrect. The underwriters for such policies tend to over-over-ensure the art object, Aldridge, going by what the owner paid for it, namely you in this case, and adding a percentage. In my reports, I must be totally honest and list what you paid, the value it's insured for, and what the real price is estimated to be from an independent appraiser, as well as my own estimate, of course."

"Are you a recognized appraiser?"

"No, but one, most reputable ones can claim that, as the word reputable implies, only by reputation. And, as a Detective Inspector in the Art and Antiques Division of Scotland Yard, I'm qualified to include my appraisal in my reports. I already have my own idea of its worth. I can see that even through the ketchup."

"So, what's your appraisal?"

Esther smiled and winked at him. "You'll get a copy of my report, Aldridge."

He hesitated, the red in his face slowly dissipating. "And what about finding the criminal who did this?"

"You'll find after a bit of cleaning and restoration, the painting hasn't been harmed. I don't think that was your intruder's intent. But yes, I'm as angry as you are about this travesty. And also curious. Why go to all the trouble of breaking into your residence and committing this act? Why not steal the painting? Or all of them? Something peculiar is afoot, Mr. Aldridge. We must find out what it is."

Chapter Two

Forger Number One

Apparently, Steven Aldridge was a busy bloke. It took him almost three weeks to do his assigned homework. By that time, Esther had almost forgotten about him and his little van Gogh. She was a busy inspector, and the division's lack of staff was chronic.

She took the painting to her own personal "appraiser," Toby Smythe. She'd always reckoned it wasn't the wanker's real name, but he knew a lot more about art than she did—not the history of famous paintings and painters *per se*, or even mediocre ones throughout the ages, but about the technical details on how they'd produced their artwork. In brief, he was the best forger she knew, and also a retired art thief, although he insisted he'd seen the error of his ways and reformed; but she only used him as an appraiser. She suspected that now his motive for evaluating the worth of a painting was probably to see how much he could charge for a perfect copy of it; but said appraisal involved considering many details she needed in her police work, so she'd learned to work with him.

Where Esther was tall and thin for the most part (the parts of her that weren't thin had been attractive enough for the three sexy men who'd become her husbands), Toby was short and wide. A much nicer version of Steven Aldridge in both appearance and personality, Toby certainly also wasn't a sociopathic snob. He was Friar Tuck (addicted to his tankards of ale and not mead) and had a great sense of humor, even though life had dealt him a terrible blow: He was paralyzed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair, all caused by a fall that had occurred when he'd been trying to enter a mansion to steal a painting. Steven Aldridge possessed none of Toby's good qualities nor the forger's bad ones that were so useful to Esther.

He took one look at the painting and said, "Vincent's wonderful swirls lie far in the future relative to this little gem, Esther. I suppose the old boy needed to become a bit mad first."

"What do you think this little gem is worth?"

"Sotheby's or some other famous auction house would try to inflate the price, Inspector, I'm sure of that, but you missed my meaning, a double one." He giggled. "I could have painted this better."

"So, it's a van Gogh before he developed his inimitable style? That's like a Picasso before cubism or a Gauguin before Tahiti. Their early work is valuable because of their later masterpieces, at least to snobs like Aldridge."

"No, I meant that whoever painted this could never have managed to paint 'Starry Night,' ma'am. I can tell from the blues and greens that the paints were mixed on a twentieth-century palette. We can confirm that, of course, if we take a sample from the painting's edge to Dieter Schmidt."

"Is he a Schmidt in the same way that Toby's a Smythe?"

Toby smiled. "No, he's a chemistry professor at Imperial College. He has a dandy little gadget called a mass spectrometer that tells us what the chemical content of a substance is, paints artists use, in particular."

"I see. And?"

"That's it, Esther. You'll find this painting is a fake, not a van Gogh at all. No, no way. A poor copy even."

"Before we go down that road that might lead nowhere, what would it be worth if it were the real thing?"

“Um, difficult to tell. We have only a few but valuable examples of van Gogh’s earlier efforts. The real thing might fetch a quarter-million or more, higher if there’s a bidding war at an auction as there so often is. But this copy might have been worth even more with the ketchup, I dare say. Remember Banksy.”

“That bad?” He nodded. “Why? Just for the paints used?”

“Paints, brush strokes, perspective, etc. I’m surprised you didn’t catch all those details, Esther.”

She nodded. “My only excuse is that I only saw it with the ketchup. On the way over here, I was driving, so I didn’t really have the time study the clean version either.”

“So, is ye olde toff maybe taking the Mickey?”

“No, that old toff doesn’t know enough about art to do that.” She thought a moment. “He has all the paperwork from the gallery in Denmark where he purchased it. Perhaps that’s fake?”

“Um, something rotten there, I dare say, to quote a famous play about a Dane,” he said with a smile. “Of course, it’s such a bad van Gogh copy, maybe someone stole the original and replaced it with this knowing the stupid owner wouldn’t know enough to tell the difference anytime soon.”

“The owner was out of the country. Why would the intruder then call attention to the copy by splashing ketchup all over it?”

“Excellent question, love. Here’s my educated guess for you to consider: There were two art thieves. The first one makes the substitution and nicks the original to offer it on the black market. The second has the same idea, but he realizes it’s a fake, so he expresses his displeasure with that ketchup splash. Message to Mr. Aldridge from the second thief: ‘Sir, you bought a fake and wasted my time!’”

Esther finished that little speech: “Because thief number two knew the copy was basically worthless.”

“Indeed. Did your SOCOs find any forensics evidence of any value?”

“Beyond the ketchup and Aldridge’s own fingerprints, no. He won’t be happy hearing this news, by the way.”

“I could always make him a new copy, much better than the one you’ve brought for me to examine. He’d probably have never known the difference if you hadn’t told him.”

She nodded and smiled. “I haven’t yet. I can’t steel myself to do that to the little imp even though he is a nasty little snob.” She waved at the painting. “Let’s go with your theory for now. Who could have stolen the real painting and made the switch?”

“There are a lot of art thieves who have or had an MO like that. Their copies go from very good to very inferior, all done on the fly, but they give the thief time to leave the UK with the real version and sell it elsewhere or pass it on to someone who will.”

“How could he have entered the house to study the painting long enough to copy it?”

Toby smiled. “In this case, the copy is only an inferior one. There are plenty of catalogs, newsletters, and media articles filled with photos. All such a thief would have needed is a color photograph and a rudimentary knowledge of van Gogh’s stylistic periods because most collectors are like Aldridge: No real knowledge of art required to own valuable paintings. Instead, they spend a lot of their money on the paper documentation, provenance of the painting, etc., which also can often be fake, of course. I could make a copy for you by the weekend, complete with a paper trail, that’s much better than this one.”

“I see. Shouldn’t the restorer have detected the forgery?”

“Do you mean now?” She nodded. “Not necessarily. He’d have to know about the paints used in that time and the painter’s style. Most restorers are only glorified techies. If he were really skilled, and there are only some knocked-out chips of dry paint to replace, he’d do the molecular-spectroscopy gig and match the paints used, but I’m guessing your toff would go cheap when hiring a restorer.”

“Yes, I believe he would...and did. Can you provide me with a list of suspects?” Esther cocked her head to one side and eyed him with suspicion. “Just to be fair, add your name to the list as well, Toby.”

“You don’t trust me, ma’am?”

“I let you go once before because you helped me a lot during an investigation.” She waved a hand at the bedroom he used as his studio. “I’m betting you’re still tempted at times.”

“I sell my copies but always tell my clients they’re copies now, Esther.”

She pointed to a piece on one of his easels where a saint wore a halo; Toby’s tonsure didn’t qualify. “Clearly that bloke didn’t pose for you live. But what about a more modern example?”

“Are you buying?” She shook her head and he smiled. “Then it doesn’t matter, does it?”

Chapter Three

Scotland Yard's Art and Antiques Division

The only thing Esther missed about being head of the Art and Antiques Division was her old office. Not that it had been Buckingham Palace, probably not even as big as one of the palace's loos, but her current office would be dwarfed by many people's walk-in closets in comparison let alone any room at the Queen's residence. It had only enough space for her small desk and its matching chair and a ricketier chair for a guest; in a bind, she could fit two more people if they stood on each side of the sitting guest. George Langston was now sitting in that guest chair, his knees against the desk's front.

"I just had a bit of a telephone barney with your Mr. Aldridge. Did you insult him, Esther?"

"If I did, he needs to get a tougher skin to match his crocodile-like personality. What were his complaints?"

"First, that you took his painting to be appraised without any accompanying guards. I explained that he would have had to provide those himself. HM's Scotland Yard isn't in the business of providing bodyguards for paintings."

"Well done, sir. But there's something else?"

"Number two is a problem. He wants another appraisal."

"For your information, what he'll get from us is zero."

"Come now, the painting must be worth something."

Esther smiled. "His painting isn't really a van Gogh, George. It's worth nothing. Correction: The frame might be worth something, at least for fire kindling."

"He bought a fake painting?" She told him Toby's theory without mentioning it came from Toby. George nodded because he trusted Esther. "But he has an appraisal, and it's based on it being a van Gogh. So he said."

"From a gallery in Amsterdam."

"Another appraisal is probably needed then," George said to the ceiling to avoid Esther's obstinate glare.

"As a Labour party member in bad standing, I'll make a stink if you insist on ordering that. It would be a waste of the taxpayer's money. Let him use his own damn money to get another appraisal. If it's an honest one and disagrees with what's in my report, I'll eat the paper it's written on. Before taking that maladroit decision that questions my professional skills, George, you might want to wait for one more confirmation. I shall have the paint tested to prove the oils were purchased recently, relative to Vinnie's time, of course."

"Vinnie?"

"Vincent van Gogh, the mad Dutchman. In fact, that's where I'm going after you bugger off: Ye olde Imperial College to have a chinwag with *Herr* Professor Dietrich Schmidt, ye olde molecular chemist. For some sort of chemical analysis." She waved a plastic evidence bag filled with little chips and dust.

"You damaged the painting?"

"I removed it from the frame and took samples from the edge that's covered by said frame. By the way, neither the overall frame nor the frame the canvas was stretched across were made from ancient wood, but that says nothing about what's on the canvas, of course."

He shrugged. "Let me know how that goes. When you return, let's talk."

Chapter Four

Imperial College, London

If Esther were in East Berlin again, the name Dietrich Schmidt might appear to be some Stasi agent's alias, but this Dietrich was muscular, good-looking, and had a tight, athletic arse that she admired when he went to his office door to hand her samples off to an assistant. Ye olde chemistry professor wasn't old, in fact, and she had to wonder how he'd become a full professor in such a short time. *Does the College hand out full professorships if the applicant is a German?* The man was no rocket scientist, after all, and probably hadn't been born until after World War Two.

"He'll return forthwith," Schmidt said. "How's my friend Toby?"

Esther's eyebrows shot up in surprise. *How does he know about Toby?* "You mean Toby Smythe?"

"Of course." Schmidt laughed. "One of those cases where we must wonder why he doesn't use all that awesome talent he possesses to make an honest living. His own works are quite good quality in my honest opinion. Have you seen any of them?"

Esther demurred. She'd been in Toby's flat many times but hadn't paid much attention to what he was working on in that bedroom-studio, always assuming it was a copy. *Maybe I'm not being fair to the rascal?* "Can't say I have."

"Have him show you then. I've purchased two of them. They're lovely scenes from Ireland, and he gave me a deal."

Was Toby Irish? Not with that name! Another mystery to solve. "So, you know the bloke well?"

"Of course. Sometimes he repairs or copies old paintings and wants them to be as authentic as possible, so he has the original paints analyzed."

I bet! Esther thought. "So, he does what I'm doing?"

"Um, the reverse, I suppose. I try not to think about it."

"Isn't that aiding and abetting, professor?"

"Yes, if there's evidence for what he's trying to do. I never have any. I go to his flat sometimes just to unwind from my work here. I'm around tech and scientific geniuses all the time during my hours here at the college. It's wonderful to talk about art with someone."

Esther nodded. "Another type of genius. I can see that. My husbands were geniuses. One was even an Oxford professor."

"Husbands?" He looked a bit shocked.

"No divorces, professor. I'm not the proverbial 'black widow,' just a woman who's had an awful run of bad luck. Worse for them, of course, but we had some fun before they departed from this mortal coil."

"I see. You're an interesting lady, Inspector."

"I'll take that as a compliment, but don't get any ideas. I'm old enough to be your mother. Perhaps I should rephrase that differently: You're young enough to be my son. How did you become a full professor here so soon?"

He shrugged. "I had four patents in plastics by the time I was sixteen. I came here to get away from the military-industrial complex, to put a fine point on it."

"Um, you're sounding like some damn Yankee liberal, but you have a German accent—I know it well—and yet you work here in England."

"Ah, but the work that led to the patents occurred in Hamburg for a company with its headquarters here in London. With the creation of the EU, we're all just one big happy family,

aren't we? And yes, before you continue to display your awesome detective's skills, that company also had a branch in Philadelphia."

"So, you gave up research for teaching?"

"No, inspector, I wanted to continue my research but also help young people get into it: Spreading my enthusiasm and knowledge, to be precise."

"Um, good for you." She pushed herself halfway up using the front of Dietrich's desk.

"Shall I return tomorrow? I don't want to keep you from more productive activities, and I'd like to say hello to an old friend of mine while I'm here."

"A professor?"

"Yes. Donald Townes, a physicist. My second husband Alfred and I were friends of Donald and his wife when we were at Cambridge."

"Haven't met him, but I've heard of him. I believe he does far-out research mortals like me cannot begin to understand."

"Yes, he's a bit of an eccentric. When shall I return?"

"Could I make an invitation? Why don't the two of you join me for lunch? I'll bring my partner along. We'll make it a foursome."

"Is your partner another professor?"

"Someday, I suppose. He's the aide doing your assays. Also European, Spanish to be precise. I met him in Barcelona last summer."

"Isn't a relationship with a student, even a graduate student, against the rules?"

"Hardly. They look the other way when you're married to that student."

I suppose I asked for that! "Um, lunch would be fine then. Say meeting here at twelve-thirty?"

As she went down the hall, she was smiling. *That was a wee surprise, Esther old girl! Academic life has become a bit more overtly lively since your Oxford days. I'll have to warn Donald!*

Chapter Five

After Lunch at a Kensington Pub

After an entertaining and interesting lunch—Dietrich’s partner was as gregarious and slyly humorous as Donald Townes was—Esther left Kensington and made her way back to the Yard with her assay results. They’d only confirmed that the paint used to make Aldridge’s copy had indeed been manufactured in the twentieth century; in other words, the man’s precious van Gogh was now officially declared to be a fake.

Although she could handle firearms and shoot as well as most men and knew different versions of martial arts (more from her MI6 training than from Scotland Yard’s), due to her age and gender, she’d decided to have backup for her next visit to the first name she chose from Toby’s list. She’d worked with the bookish-looking DS Flores a few times. Jaime was an older man who would look a bit like Garcia Marquez if the sergeant would get rid of his thick glasses, which, of course, made him look more erudite. She only knew the famous Colombian author from BBC documentaries, though, so her comparison might not hold true if she’d known Gabo in person. Of his novels, Esther liked his *Autumn of the Patriarch* best because it rolled many evil autocratic and evil personalities all into one. She’d known a few in East Germany.

Jaime’s artsy nature wasn’t a surprise considering where he worked, and he knew a lot more about art than literature. He’d had an internship at Birmingham University’s museum as a young man before he became a police officer. Unlike Schmidt’s partner, Jaime’s entire family had emigrated from Spain, Barcelona to be precise, and he could speak French, Italian, Spanish, and that strange patois, Catalan, like a native, besides English. That was useful at times, but his knowledge of painting and sculpture—both his wife and he dabbled in those arts—was better than most detectives’ in Esther’s division. She wasn’t quite sure about the quality of his protection, though; she might need to protect him, in fact, but at least his body was stronger and more youthful than hers. And in any case, he would be another potential target to distract an assassin.

She gestured towards her little guest chair and said, “Take a look at what’s in that folder while I do battle with a fire-breathing dragon, namely our new email system that we seem to be beta-testing, I believe it’s called.”

“Yes, my modest and non-technical opinion is that it’s a bit temperamental, Esther, if that’s any consolation.”

“It’s not a consolation. And I must do things at least twice because what I send all too often gets lost somewhere in some electronic Neverland, so I write out the email first. Helps me keep them brief, I suppose, and gives me a quality copy.”

He smiled. “Maybe an e-Hook gets his e-jollies from reading your e-efforts?” From her glare, he saw she didn’t find that comment amusing. He dove into the contents of the folder.

They worked for about ten minutes in silence, and then he said, “Looks straightforward enough.” Esther turned to face him. “You should just tell Mr. Aldridge he was duped and then wash your hands of the case.”

“I’m tempted, but that poor toff can’t help it that he was born an idiot. After all, his stupidity gives him the qualifications he needs to be a Tory in Parliament, not to mention hobnobbing with the royal family. But my gut feeling is that what happened to Aldridge is more generic than Langston suspects.”

“You can conclude that even with the ketchup splashed on a masterpiece?”

“Masterpieces stolen and fakes left in their places. Sot the ketchup. Do you realize how many cases like this have occurred and gone cold?”

“No idea, but I reckon you’re about to tell me. Do you mean cases with the same MO?” She nodded. “Never heard of it happening before if I’m honest. Art thievery is a strange crime, though.”

“Eleven times in the last two years by my count. Same MO without the bloody ketchup. Underwriters caught some of the fakes; owners and/or their hired appraisers the others. Nothing ever recovered. And there very well could be more.”

“Doesn’t lend itself to a speedy heist, I dare say. The Gardner Museum’s thieves wouldn’t have time for that, but I think they share another characteristic we might want to consider: They were probably acting on requests made by rich arsens who coveted the paintings because they passed on more valuable works.”

Esther nodded. She’d thought that too. *Was Aldridge guilty of that? How did the gallery in Denmark get into the act then?*

“Have you queried Europol or Interpol for sales of the stolen paintings, the real ones?” Jaime continued.

“That’s what I want you to tackle, Jaime: Europol, Interpol, and national police in countries where the paintings were originally purchased and/or pilfered. You can do that with the help of DC Harris; I’ve already spoken to her. But right now, you can also give me company as I visit those forgers on my snout’s list. One of them might know something relevant.”

“That’s Toby’s list?”

“Very good. Do you know Toby?”

“He teaches night classes. Maria took a drawing class from him a few years ago. I met him a couple of times. Nice bloke. He admitted he was a reformed art forger and art thief. The students were all adults and thought that was intriguing.”

“So, he claims...about being reformed, that is. No matter, though, because he can still grass on active forgers and thieves, hence the list.”

Jaime smiled. “He might just want to eliminate the competition.”

Esther frowned. “You would think of that.”

Chapter Six

Forger Number Two

Esther and Jaime took out one of the Yard's unmarked cars and headed out of the city after leaving Caitlin Harris to begin the calling task to international authorities. The detective constable had two detective skills that Esther valued: She was a good communicator, both as listener and speaker, and an organized note-taker. Even though the constable had an excellent memory, she preferred to have key points from conversations written down, and they were organized in such a way that Esther could use them afterwards.

The Old Smoke was like most European cities: Farther from the center of the conurbation, it wasn't as congested, but one still found enclaves of seedy neighborhoods filled with squalor plopped among others that were posh, residents of the first never seen in the second, and vice versa. Through the centuries, the city had spread in a disorganized fashion, its urban blight swallowing everything in its path, although efforts were occasionally made to halt the chaos and disintegration.

Esther had chosen Frank Romano from somewhere near the middle of Toby's list because Romano was known to her, and she knew where he'd probably be found. She'd nicked him only once for something now forgotten, but she knew he'd been a suspect in other crimes. He must have been confident that she had nothing on him now because he just looked surprised and then refocused on his break at the pool table.

Always the gentleman, though, he said, "Challenging me to a game, are you, Esther?"

It was the middle of the afternoon. The pub was empty except for Esther, Frank, Jaime, and a very bored publican. No other service people, pool players, no one at darts, and no one drinking besides Frank, who was nursing a half-lager.

She winked at Jaime. "If we can still talk."

Frank nodded and chalked his stick. "Can't play with the publican—he's getting ready for the evening crowd—and 'tis no fun beating myself. Pick your cue, lady."

"And I'm sure you won't mind if Jaime here writes down anything you say that's a reasonable answer to my questions."

"Your definition of reasonable, I suppose, but okay. What's today's topic?"

"The usual: Art theft, art thieves, and their MOs."

"Sorry. Don't know nothin' 'bout that."

"You knew enough to be the Queen's guest for two years, and that short a stay only occurred because you got time off for good behavior."

"'Twasn't for nicking a painting, Luv."

"'Twas for leaving a homeowner unconscious, most likely in the process of nicking a painting. That you scarpered before doing that is beside the point."

"Never came up in the trial. The art thievery, that is. No evidence."

"Lazy Crown Court and prosecutors, I dare say. They didn't care how they put you in gaol. We have a legal system in the UK, not a justice system."

"Are you saying I wasted two years, and the toff didn't get his justice?"

"My honest opinion, yes."

"As God is my witness, he did. That little stay was hell for me. 'Tis why I'm now reformed, so help me God."

"Going religious on me, Frank?"

"You're a tough old bird, Esther. Not a bad looking one, mind, but tough."

Frank broke. He must have been a bit out of practice, or he was being chivalrous by giving Esther a chance, pocketing only three balls and leaving the remaining ones unclustered. She won the first round. They traded stripes and solids, and she broke.

“I’m not looking to nick you for anything, Frank,” she said after pocketing four and leaving him only tight clusters, “at least not yet, but I’m interested in any grass you might have on your associates who use your same MO.”

“What MO would that be?”

“Stealing a painting and replacing it with a fake copy to give yourself time to shop the real one around if you don’t already have a client for it.”

He sighed. “I should have patented that technique. Lot of copycats now.”

“I still would have nicked you. My snout says the fakes you make are awful.”

“So that so-called connoisseur of fine art says, whoever he might be. Toffs usually have no idea about art and artists. I had a laugh when one showed all his elite guests a fake for more than a year. Someone had to tell the moron ‘twas a fake, or he might never have known.”

“It’s like a bloke with an expensive car,” Esther said. “He has no idea what’s under the bonnet, but he knows how much that expensive machine cost him. It’s about prestige, Frank.”

“Ego, in other words. ‘I have something ordinary people can’t afford.’ Just like the ape tribe’s alpha male beating his chest, I dare say.”

“So, no secret to your less-than-successful MO: Human nature. And even if the painting’s owner knows he has a fake, he might be too embarrassed to admit it.”

Frank had blown his chance of getting a ball from one of the clusters into the pocket. She finished him off and stood and faced him. “Let’s stop blathering about art thievery in general and your damned MO. Who’s active right now, assuming you’re not?”

“Give me some names and I’ll tell you if they’re still in the game.”

“Hold this cue.” She gave her stick to Frank and found Toby’s list in her purse.

As she went down through the list, omitting Frank and Toby, he gave her a thumb’s-up or down. She then gave him a bill.

“What’s that for? So far, you’re beating me, hen.”

“You can have my lager and yours both. I’m on duty. Make it full glasses too. Jaime and I must move along now.”

Frank jerked a thumb at Jaime after scanning him from head to toe and shaking his head. “Your mute bodyguard?”

“A friend who doesn’t like art thieves, so be careful with what you say.”

Frank laughed. “Where’d you learn to play like that?”

“I started by beating two older brothers who’d taught me the rudiments and paid the price. About the only thing they were good for, I dare say.”

“Allow me to accompany you out to your car, Inspector Brookstone. Jaime looks a bit nervous.”

“We both might be more nervous if you accompany us,” the DS said.

“He can talk!”

“Among other things,” Esther said.

They left the pub.

“You two be careful,” Frank said, leaning into Esther’s open window on the driver’s side. “This is a dangerous neighborhood. And some of the eejits on that list can be a bit violent at times.”

“Thanks for the warning. They won’t try anything in daylight hours.”

“But who says I wouldn’t if you came here again? You put me in, Esther.”

She eyed him. “You now know what it’s like inside. You don’t want to get nicked again, Frank.”

He smiled. “How do you know I’m not just chatting you up. Jaime could watch and learn a few tricks. You’re too classy of a hen for these parts; you stand out, Luv.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Thank you, Frank. You have a good day now.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Seven

On the Way to Oxford

“You handled him well,” Jaime said to Esther as they headed towards the motorway to Oxford. “And beat him at his own game. Literally.”

“I’m generally a good judge of character, Jaime. Romano’s just addicted to easy money, from playing pool to art thievery. He’s not a violent person; at least he wasn’t. The wounded toff was more likely an accident because he’d usually just run away from violence. Of course, he could change. Prison can affect someone in many ways.”

“You probably realize then that he could be lying about the wankers on Toby’s list. Even about himself.”

“Of course. I’m an old woman, but I’ve been around. In these circumstances, I take everything as a maybe. I’m always wary. But we now have a place to start.”

From Toby Smythe, Frank Romano, and other criminals from earlier cases, Esther had reaffirmed her belief that illegal trafficking in artwork was a lot more clandestine and sophisticated than trafficking in drugs, liquor, or jewelry. The latter crime provided the best A-B comparison, but people displayed their ill-gotten jewels more than art. Someone buying a painting or sculpture from the black market could be perfectly happy to hide it away and be the only person ever to enjoy it.

Artwork was also the better investment. A famous painting, hidden or not, invariably increased in value, which was why those old Nazis stole so much artwork during World War Two, much of it from old Jews who died in the Nazi holocaust, although the value of that stolen artwork might not be fully realized until the paintings were once again in the public domain. That was Esther’s pet peeve about art trafficking: What right did some rich bloke have to exclusively enjoy a work of art and prevent the public from viewing it? She thought any masterpiece, or even a work by a master before they became famous, should be viewable in a public art museum, not in some rich toff’s secret vault.

She well knew that many art owners weren’t really art lovers. Too many just saw a piece of art as an investment that could just as well have been a first edition of a famous book or the original sheet music corresponding to a famous symphony. A rich bloke might have never read the book nor listened to the symphony or admired the art, but his investment would show the world that they had tons of money: The purpose was almost always to inflate their egos. Prone to extrapolations, she wondered whether sometime in the future rich toffs would buy their own rockets and tour space, something most people couldn’t afford to do either. But maybe not? That sounded like a poor investment unless the rich toffs sold tickets to other rich passengers.

She stopped at a rest area on their way to an address in Oxford, the address for a gallery she knew was owned by another suspect on Toby’s list who sometimes acted as a pawnbroker for stolen art as well as the thief of said art, using the same MO as Aldridge’s art thief. That rest area served two purposes: She needed a loo and a freshening up, and she needed to call Caitlin to see how the young DC was doing with contacting the international coppers.

When she returned to the car, Jaime was still in the gents’, so Esther called the office without him.

“Any news, Constable?”

“Some success, ma’am. One wanker on your list left a fingerprint at Aldridge’s, a bit blurry but good enough for the *Bundespolizei*, the national police in Germany, to ID it as belonging to a Wolfgang Suhr, whereabouts now unknown.”

“Aldridge’s van Gogh is small enough to be portable, and he might have had a lot of time to sell it, here or even abroad to some egotistical sultan with far too much oil money his poor subjects will never see. The thief’s problem would not be having all the paperwork; Aldridge still has all that.”

“It could have even been a contract made with someone,” Caitlin said.

“In any case, anyone with too much money and no moral scruples. And I know how to find that buyer! I’ll be contacting you again, Caitlin, my dear. Good work!”

“You should congratulate the SOCO team as well, ma’am.”

“But of course. I shall when I return.”

Because Jaime hadn’t yet returned to the squad car, she now made another call to set up an appointment back in London. When he finally returned, she negotiated several roundabouts and went back the way they’d come.

She’d explained to Jaime what had transpired in his absence, but nothing about her plans. He only nodded because he was busy stuffing himself with a tomato sandwich and crisps. She stole some of the crisps—it was a police car, after all, not her Jaguar.

Chapter Eight

A Visit to MI5

Like Scotland Yard that had moved to what was now called “New Scotland Yard,” MI5 had also outgrown its traditional quarters, primarily to better handle threats to the UK’s related to domestic terrorism. The government’s space solution had been to rent some floors in a building that came with half an underground garage, basement, and enough additional space above to include “situational awareness” rooms filled with huge screens to monitor its ARUs on the prowl and view other activities. Ambreesh Singh lived in the IT center found in the basement of that building.

His swarthy skin and Sikh’s turban wouldn’t be noteworthy among the UK’s diverse urban populations, especially in the Old Smoke—many immigrants from the Indian subcontinent had arrived over the decades to make the UK their home—but he was rarely seen outside that building. An exception occurred when he met Esther Brookstone and Jaime Flores for coffee as a favor to Esther, who didn’t want others in MI5 to know she was stealing some of the technical wizard’s time.

The meeting place was a coffee bar that wasn’t far from the West End theater district, but Esther knew the area better for its small enclave of art galleries. She even had her eyes on one she wanted to purchase for her golden years if she could manage that. The constant foot-traffic of locals and gawking tourists in the area, the latter mostly Yanks with too much money looking for the perfect mementos and other gifts to impress friends and relatives back home, meant that there were always customers out and about.

Ambreesh was already seated at a corner table with room for four chairs only if they pulled the table away from the wall; he was sipping his coffee but waved at Esther. At that early afternoon hour, the coffee bar wasn’t too crowded; but it had a good reputation, so the crowds would later swell and give rise to standing room only. The reputation originated in its eschewing of the Americans’ fancy this-and-that caffeinated creations that Yanks often looked for, instead providing its customers with excellent coffee made and served Italian-style. The background music also had a continental flavor, French and Italian mostly, although Esther had even heard selections from *Die Fledermaus* one time she was there.

They joined the Sikh techie. While Jaime studied the limited but quality offerings in the menu, Ambreesh alternated between smiling at Esther and studying Jaime. He knew Esther was just bringing her DS along for company or maybe protection and had no reason to distrust him, but he found the bookish man bit of a curious bloke and not very much like the typical detective sergeant. Of course, Esther wasn’t the typical detective inspector either.

Esther had met Ambreesh a few years earlier when she’d asked Jeremy Brand, the current director of MI5’s terrorism division, a favor, one of many she thought he owed her. Jeremy had been her handler when she worked as a spy in East Berlin for MI6 (aka SIS) during the Cold War. She assumed his now being a VIP in MI5 by no means meant she couldn’t collect on some accrued favors she’d earned during those perilous times.

Both gentlemen from MI5, Brand and Singh, were serious, competent, intelligent, and filled with pent-up energy, but Jeremy still had those same cold gray-blue eyes and lack of emotions he’d had as her MI6 handler, not bad traits for a spymaster but possibly a bit too much for an MI5 VIP who had to please both Labourites and Tories who really ran the Queen’s secret services politically. Ambreesh was more pleasant and had a much better sense of humor. She didn’t think the differences between the two to be due to ethnicities, though, just personalities.

Ambreesh was a family man, so that mellowed him; Jeremy was a longtime bachelor, but she knew he'd once had feelings for her, and maybe still had.

After Esther summarized her case, Ambreesh said, "Unlike me, I suppose this Wolfgang Suhr wouldn't want his real name and profession bandied about within the UK, so he probably has several aliases that he uses."

"Oh yes, and the new ones are as equally bland as the old ones, I presume. Geoff Robinson and Hiram Stevenson are two old ones he's probably already discarded. Your mission, Mr. Singh, and hopefully it's not an impossible one, is to find out what his current alias is and where I might find the wanker. He stole a van Gogh this time, which is a step up in perfidy."

"How diabolical! I'm a bit underwater right now, to be honest. It will take me some time, Esther."

She frowned. "You're a victim of your own success, as they say. That Jeremy overworks you, sir."

He laughed. "Not Jeremy. One child at night and the other in the oven. My wife is expecting again. Last night strawberries and pickles were on the midnight menu."

"Your child likes strawberries with pickles?"

"No, he just has nightmares."

"I understand: Wife's hormones. Congratulations are in order, I suppose. So how many months is she along?"

"Only in the third. Critical times, for many things in addition to food yens."

"But how many days will you need for my tasks? Not a lot, I hope."

"Saturday afternoon okay?"

"This Saturday?"

"Yes. I can work on your tasks that morning. My results might not be to your liking: I could explore a lot of the electronic universe, here and abroad, hidden and otherwise, and still find no trail for you to follow, you know."

"We can only try."

Chapter Nine Back in the Yard

George Langston spotted Esther and Jaime entering the division and intercepted them before they could find Caitlin Harris. He invited them into his office that once was Esther's; he'd rearranged things to suit his tastes, of course, so it seemed to be a gentleman's domain now, complete with the faint odor left from smoking his pipe on the sly, breaking one of his own rules.

"I need an update, detectives."

"Because you want to drag me off onto other tasks?" Esther said, taking a chair and motioning to Jaime to sit as well. At least George's office had two chairs. "Mr. Aldridge won't be too happy about that."

"Aldridge is a damn nuisance. Have you met the gentleman, Jaime?"

"Can't say I've had the pleasure, sir," the bookish man said with a smile.

"Um, between the three of us, he's an egotistical bastard, so you're a lucky bloke. Of course, Esther has had to always demonstrate unusual patience when dealing with the elites, but with you two out of office, he's been burning my ears with complaints about the slow progress of the investigation, as if we don't have other cases to solve."

"I knew it!" Esther said. "I suppose there's some MP now trying to jump the queue because his daughter's favorite doll has gone missing!"

"An MP's wife, to put a fine point on it. Lady Thornberg, but not a doll. She picked up a religious painting she fancied on her last trip to Florence and wants Esther to create papers for it: Appraisal and provenance."

Esther sighed. "Besides being illegal, I don't have the time. She can have someone else do that task, somebody who won't tell her only a numpty would spend a lot of money on an old painting without a proper paper trail."

Langston smiled. "You must have met her."

"Bastiann once invited me to accompany him to a charity fete in Rotterdam he had two tickets for. He got them because he'd done some favor for the royal family, and he felt compelled to attend. I enjoyed it more than he did, of course. The Earl has the patience of the saint in the painting, complete with his tonsure as halo, and coddles Lady Thornberg, who, after all, is a harmless and lovable old twit. Bastiann made the mistake of mentioning to her what I do for a living. Talk about burning my ears!"

"He did you no favors," Jaime said.

Esther had seen him following the dialogue between her and George. *Fascinated by my moving in those circles? Little does he realize how boring it all is!*

"Is your relationship with Bastiann becoming a serious one?" Langston said, obviously in a hurry to change the subject. He knew Esther well. "It's quite a long-distance one, I dare say."

"That's none of your business, George; and yes, it's long-distance and maybe better left that way for now. We won't get bored with each other and will just have fun." She thought a moment, index finger to lips. "I'll give Lady Thornberg a call and recommend a reputable appraiser and authenticator. I'm a government official, so either I'd have to do the task for free and risk losing her as a friend if the painting's a fake—those old religious pieces were all too often copied by one of the artist's many students, hence so many lacking papers—or I might get into trouble with our VIPs if I try to charge her for services rendered. And imagine how the *Guardian* would run with a story about one of us doing a favor for an MP's wife!"

He sighed. “I thought you might be able to do it on the sly. I’d say nothing if you’d say nothing.”

She laughed. “Easy enough for you to say. I’d be signing the papers. That’s what might get back to our VIPs.”

“Um, it might. Yes, go ahead and do what you said. Now, what about Aldridge’s van Gogh?”

SAMPLE

Chapter Ten

Aldridge and the PM

The problem with Aldridge was exacerbated by his having the PM's ear. They were old school chums, both Eton graduates. They'd made their fortunes in different ways, Aldridge in electronics and the PM in pharmaceuticals, but neither was technical nor particularly creative. Although the Yanks had invented the Peter Principle that held employees rose to positions where they were completely incompetent, the UK's own universe of business and government was filled with employees who were all too obvious examples of that principle: Privileged positions and luck all too often mattered more than skill or creativity.

The relationship between the two VIPs meant that George Langston was duty bound to coddle Aldridge. Esther felt she had no such constraints. Both VIPs were Tories, so they started with one strike against them, as baseball fans in the US might say. (She occasionally wondered why the Yanks had destroyed perfectly good games like cricket and football but never dwelt long on those subtle mysteries.) Another strike against them came from the fact that they were overbearing elitists far worse even than the Queen's children. A third came from the claims they made of being captains of industry who were leading an economic revival in the UK; she knew that the true creativity of their enterprises stemmed from the many clever technical geniuses who worked for them. *Three strikes and you're out! Or was it four?* She'd need to corral a Yank somewhere and ask. Probably any American tourist would know, although they'd know nothing about cricket.

That all led to different conclusions from Esther and George Langston: His was to insist that Esther handle Aldridge with care in her investigation; hers was to mostly ignore Aldridge and research how he'd obtained the van Gogh. While Wolfgang Suhr might be able to answer the latter, she also wanted some investigation done at the beginning: Who had owned the little painting originally, and why had the original owner sold it willingly to Aldridge? She'd focus on that for a bit as others pursued other aspects of the investigation.

After the session with Langston, Esther and Jaime met with Caitlin and another constable, DC Michael McKenny, the older man who could have passed for Henry VIII if he wore the appropriate period-costume. They split up the work more fairly too, although Esther thought that plans could change if any new data from Ambreesh became available. In particular, she and McKenny would examine more carefully the history of the painting's owners in Europe.

She knew her team was now as complete as it could be, and Langston might soon be forcing her to give up some of its members to cover other cases better. It was a rarity to even have a team in the division. Investigations often were run by only one person, not because art thievery wasn't a common crime, but because the Yard's VIPs didn't give it much of a nod compared to other crimes. *What we need is a bit of violence to get them all hot and bothered!* She did a mental take at that thought. *Will I regret it?* Ketchup was one thing; murder most foul would be awful. *Especially for the victim!*

Wags in the Yard, political enemies and many other gadflies and jokers, often made fun of the division's plods. For some reason, most coppers didn't consider that what they did in the division amounted to real policing, echoing the Yard VIPs' opinions. In her case, calling her Miss Marple had become popular. She considered that terribly unfair. First, she might be old, but not so old she couldn't put any of them down on the floor. Her training in martial arts and shooting skills were only two things she'd mastered in preparation for her sojourn in MI6. Second, Yard inspectors tended to become lazy and fat by the time they'd reached that detective

level; she was thin, energetic, and agile. Third, the very name “plods” suggested that police officers moved slowly in any investigation for lack of brains and energy; she didn’t fit in that mold and never had. And four, Miss Marple wasn’t a detective inspector; she’d just been a nosy Nelly, although obtaining juicy gossip hadn’t been her goal.

Esther expected to be fighting against the “Miss Marple” alias until she retired and maybe even after that. *Soon George will be pressured by our superiors as they insist that I retire to make room for younger, more energetic officers. I’ll have to prove myself again and again as if I were just some constable on the beat.* She wasn’t looking forward to that future.

That started her thinking about Bastiann. The Interpol agent was a decade younger, but did that matter? She’d been married three times before, earning an alias even worse than “Miss Marple,” namely “Black Widow.” Proving the latter wrong was no reason to pursue a relationship with the Dutchman; having company in her golden years might be. *Something to consider, old thing.*

SAMPLE

Chapter Eleven

In a Suburban Flat

Although he was no angel himself, Wolfgang Suhr aka Reginald Matthewson had always thought his current client was evil. From what he knew about Russians in general, his Russian client seemed worse than any Nazi who'd invested in stolen art had been.

Wolfgang had to smile at the phrase "invested in stolen art." The investment was paying someone like him to steal it! In many cases, that was all the illegal art trade amounted to. He and the others in his business were less guilty than their clients in his mind.

He sometimes felt guilty about his victims, though. Many were innocent, their art treasures passed down through generations; many were also elderly, and even though they could have auctioned off their treasures for boatloads of money, they couldn't bear to part with them; still others didn't even realize the value of what they owned and thus didn't suitably protect the artworks from people like him; and a few were the artists themselves who actually painted the works (the modern ones, of course), their creations even winning prizes that made them want to hold on to their own artwork.

In the shadowy world of the illegal art trade, though, Wolfgang couldn't afford the luxury of guilt for very long. If not him, someone else would benefit from stealing a painting. And he had a reputation to maintain; it meant that his commission for stealing a painting would often last him a year or more, depending on the painting, its artist, and his client. He'd sometimes supplement that commission with a little blackmail; his current client was the most recent example. The Russian deserved it, though.

Blackmail was always a riskier business than stealing paintings. Wolfgang had never been greedy, so he often limited his shakedown to one payment even though he figured his victim could pay more. He thought of that praxis as a "supermarket's business model": Collect a little from lots of clients and it would all add up to his making a good living. No one would be hurt too much, so no one would look for retribution against him.

Wolfgang had begun his criminal career at the age of fourteen as a cat burglar. His precocious extracurricular activities during his teenage years had extended beyond that: First, it was his sixteen-year-old cousin who'd allowed him to put his hand in her knickers if he'd steal a diamond ring for her. Some old lady in Munich might have missed one of hers, but he thought it was unlikely because she had several and was nearly blind and had dementia.

The two cousins had gone a bit beyond exploring body parts and nicking jewels, but that early crime spree had served as a useful apprenticeship for both as their criminal horizons expanded. She was now one leader of a Berlin gang, and he was now a gofer serving rich men who wanted to acquire paintings by famous artists in any way possible. They rarely saw each other now, but he still had fond memories of his dear older cousin and her response to his lusty thrusts.

Even before delivering the van Gogh he'd stolen from Aldridge to the Russian, he'd decided to stay a while in the UK but move around a bit because staying in one spot seemed dangerous. Rich targets were plentiful all over the UK, and a lot of them were too complacent about the security surrounding their valuable artwork. Of course, he'd also become an expert in breaking into those residences their owners thought were so secure. And, by leaving a copy of the painting he'd stolen, the prats often never realized their prized *objet d'art* had been pilfered.

He was a small, thin man barely five-feet tall yet also limber and muscular. All that helped him squeeze into tight places or around them, places where few other thieves could or

want to go. Sometimes he would visit a mansion or an expensive flat posing as an inspector for an insurance company or as a repairman to obtain a first-hand look at the toff's security installation. Most of the time, though, just knowing the name of the security system's supplier was sufficient. In any case, his reputation increased for being someone who could deliver what a client desired.

Perhaps it's also time to change my name again? He'd read that someone else had been after that little van Gogh. While who it might be piqued his curiosity a bit, he'd done nothing about identifying his competitor after he'd read the report in the police records for the pending case written by its SIO, someone with the initials E. B.: The police had now discovered that Aldridge's van Gogh was a fake, the one Wolfgang had left to replace the real painting.

A knock on Wolfgang's door interrupted his meandering thoughts. He placed his brush on his easel and went through the flat to stand on his tiptoes and peer through the spyhole he'd put in the front door. *One can't be too complacent even where I'm now living!*

Big mistake! He only saw black and realized he was looking into a gun barrel. Before he could reflexively move aside, a hollow-point bullet slammed into his eye and continued into his brain. The blackness now was total as he fell to the floor, already dead.

Chapter Twelve

The Dead Forger

Scotland Yard's DI John Rawlins approached the pathologist, expecting the wanker's usual whining from the man who so often complained about anything and always seemed to expect corpses to be found during convenient hours as if he worked at an NHS facility in some regular shift. Murder victims especially seemed to appear at very inconvenient times, according to him. He also believed that plods like Rawlins shouldn't expect their cases to have priority over anyone else's. There John Rawlins often surprised him, though, because he only expected some rough but useful estimates of COD and TOD while still at the crime scene to get his team started on an investigation. In brief, they understood each other well enough.

Although it had a bit more prestige in the grand scheme of traditional British policing, Scotland Yard had gained it on the back of their able pathologists, chemists, and scene-of-crime officers, as diverse a group as any made up from the Old Smoke's citizenry. Murder most foul could occur anywhere in the capital city's conurbation, in many forms and at many times, some quite odd.

The pathologist offered his estimates that Rawlins knew were often more than guesses. "TOD's yesterday evening some time; COD was a shot through the spyhole in the door."

"I see I'm finally getting you trained," Rawlins said. "I didn't even have to ask this time."

"Don't get used to it, Inspector. An interesting case, I dare say, but the sooner I wash my hands of it, literally and figuratively, the better."

"And we have a lot of work to do after you do your quick dart to the morgue.

Considering your unusual eager-beaver attitude this morning, let me be so bold to ask if there's any secondary human residue? Skin under fingernails, etc., etc.?"

"Oil and acrylic paints are under the fingernails; no surprise there, considering his very public occupation. And considering he was found by the entrance door to his flat, I surmise that the killer never even entered. It's your problem to prove that, of course."

"Yes, it seems that the goal was to kill Mr. Suhr. One kill shot, the bullet most likely still in his brain; one dead body for your morgue. End of story for your part of the tale."

"You'll want to know the caliber of bullet, I'm sure."

"Oh, we'll want to know many things. Motive, for example."

"I remember you saying to me once that that's of secondary importance in a murder investigation. In any case, it's not my problem either. As far as I'm concerned, your shooter could be an ET who hates humans...any human."

Rawlins laughed. "Now that would be a difficult case for me to solve. In all honesty, though, knowing a motive in this case might help us know something about the assassin."

"Or vice versa. While I enjoy these little chinwags, Inspector, why don't you go have one with the lead SOCO so I can finish up here."

That was a welcome cue: Rawlins was getting bored by the conversation. He didn't want to discuss the pathologist's interrupted social activity either; his spacesuit didn't hide completely the tux and bow tie, unusual for that time of day. *Perhaps he pulled an over-nighter?* "Please send me your full report as soon as it's ready, Doc. We might need another chinwag then."

"Ah, the joy of anticipation."

Rawlins started his walk-around. Even though the scientific crew might come up with many useful facts, he wanted to get an idea about how the victim had spent his time. Where and

how he lived was often more important than forensic evidence. He would also be visiting the victim's gallery.

"Better call George Langston," DI Rawlins told his sergeant when he saw the paintings, all copies of just one painting, most of them unfinished with clear fingerprints from paint-spattered fingers on them. "We've got something strange going on here."

"You mean, something more unusual than the murder of a gallery owner?" DS Patty Townes said.

Rawlins had walked over the body just to annoy the pathologist and stopped to examine some of those partially painted canvases that had been tossed into a bin. Some were nearer to being finished than others.

"Our victim might not be just an innocent gallery owner. He might have also been a forger who sold copies of famous paintings in his gallery. I'm guessing this wanker was a real entrepreneur, with legal and illegal activities."

"You can tell from these that the original painting's famous?"

"Why bother to copy it otherwise? But George or one of his crew can tell us for sure. Some of them are signed 'Vincent,' not 'Wolfgang Suhr.'"

It was a test; Townes failed it. Rawlins knew no one from Langston's division would have.

"Just failed attempts, sir?"

"Certainly not well done, I dare say. He was right to discard them."

"In which case, the shooter could have been a customer who got some revenge because he might not have liked that he'd purchased a fake?"

"You're very wise, DS Obi-Wan Kenobi. I mean that in a good way. Get Langston on the phone."

George Langston referred Rawlins and Townes to Esther Brookstone.

Chapter Thirteen

At the Yard

Esther was tempted to tell George she'd appraise Lady Thornberg's new acquisition. That might at least get her to somewhere in Europe where she could meet Bastiann and let him entertain her for at least an evening.

She'd listened to Rawlins's summary of his murder case and realized all her team's hard work, especially Ambreesh's, where she'd used up one of the favors Jeremy Brand owed her, had been all for naught: Wolfgang Suhr's many clumsy attempts made to copy Aldridge's van Gogh proved that the thief of the original van Gogh had met an untimely and horrible end. It also meant that he'd passed the painting onto a buyer or reseller.

"In the future, I'll resist the temptation to look through my spyhole," she said to Rawlins and Townes.

"You only need to take a quick look and then move quickly aside, Esther," Rawlins said with a smile. "The yob outside can't see you if you do that."

"Or buy your own gun and shoot first," Townes said with a smile.

"Um, that seems almost poetic: Just two bullets meeting in the dark?" Rawlins winked at his sergeant.

"You came to the police via the university-graduates program, didn't you, Inspector Rawlins?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"The Peel Centre would have killed your romanticism." *Or maybe Rawlins was trying to impress his sergeant?* She handed him a folder. "Here's all I have involving Herr Suhr."

Rawlins accepted the folder, quickly perused its contents, and then handed it to Townes. "Make copies, or get an electronic version," he told her. Then to Esther: "This wanker was a major player, wasn't he?"

"A bad forger but quite a busy thief, nonetheless. We'll have to divide and conquer respect to the tasks ahead of us," she said to him. "You have my art thief's murder to solve; I still have to find the original painting."

Rawlins waved a hand dismissively. "And if the art thief's murderer is the buyer of the van Gogh?"

"I've considered that," Esther said. "This case is unusual, to say the least. Wolfgang's name came to us via a fingerprint, but he has an international reputation. He seems to have recently chosen to settle in the UK for a while, though; but his clients could still be international ones."

"Let's help each other then. How did your man Aldridge get the van Gogh originally, assuming what he purchased was indeed authentic?"

She didn't have the famous folder in her hands—Townes was perusing its contents—but she summarized the Yard's investigation so far up to Wolfgang's murder.

"So, Suhr provided full service: He steals a painting and then sells it, not to a pawnbroker, but to satisfy a customer's pre-order?"

"Yes, the latter is the general MO, which explains all those attempts to produce a reasonable copy he could leave in place of the original painting."

"But why was he shot? Did he double-cross someone he shouldn't have?"

Esther shrugged and gathered her thoughts. "One, Aldridge is satisfied: Even with the ketchup, he incorrectly believed he still had his little van Gogh. Two, the second buyer after

Aldridge is satisfied: He probably got the original van Gogh at a price that's probably only a fraction of what it's worth. Three, Wolfgang was satisfied: He got a tidy commission for his efforts, I'm sure. I'm trying to figure out who wasn't happy, discounting Aldridge who has now learned that the painting he ended up with was a fake even under the ketchup."

"You're focusing on what's been done with the paintings, fake and original. Maybe it's really about who knows whom? Did you tell Aldridge about Suhr?"

"You're thinking that Aldridge sought retribution?" Rawlins nodded. "I certainly didn't tell him, and none of my people have even met him. Besides, I'd skin them alive if they divulged anything to any outsider, criminal or otherwise, during a case."

"I'd do the same. That's cause for demotion at least."

"So, if it's about retribution, it must come from the last buyer, who isn't Aldridge."

"Retribution or silencing of potential witnesses. It could be someone who'd wanted the painting but needed to make sure no one knew they'd gotten it. Someone who stood to lose a lot if everyone knew they dealt in stolen artwork. A political loss, a loss in prestige, whatever."

Esther smiled and winked at Jaime. "It could even be someone with a grudge against Aldridge. He's a damn Tory, after all."

"In that case, they'd have made sure he learned that they had the painting, wouldn't they?"

"Maybe not. They could be tickled pink just by knowing they'd put one over on the old toff."

"In that case, maybe we both should be looking at Aldridge's enemies—political, commercial, and in the art world. Who does he not support in the coming elections? Did some business competitor just lose a bid to Aldridge's firm? Is anyone Aldridge knows also collecting art and thus competing for what's available on the black market?"

Esther thought a moment about the bid comment. Aldridge had made his millions by selling complex sensors, most of those sales made to military and government agencies. He hadn't come in at the beginning of the demand, but she knew he sold quality products. That didn't imply he was a genius; it only meant he had hired smart people who were well paid so they wouldn't jump ship to start their own firms: Quality had trumped tradition in his case. That was something she hadn't considered in much detail; she wouldn't have had the personnel to do it anyway.

"You'll have to handle that business angle, John. You'll be able to add enough officers to do it. My hands are tied in that sense."

"Of course. And you'll be busy enough with the artsy end of things."

She ignored the implied critique of her division. "And I know someone who will look at the political end: Jeremy Brand's people."

"MI5? I'd hate to get them involved."

They already bloody are! "I assure you Jeremy's okay and will be discreet. Not even he wants to upset anyone who might retaliate with a budget cut as revenge for a frontal attack on their domain."

Rawlins laughed. "Understood. You know him well, do you?"

She now frowned. "Well enough. Not the way your lecherous mind is considering, though. He was my boss in Germany long ago. That's all I'll say." *That's all I can say!*

"If I wanted to do so, I could find out the details; but what you've said is enough for the moment to satisfy my curiosity and assuage my fears about an MI5 takeover of the case. And for now, we've sorted things enough, so we'll not be stepping on each other's toes."

Chapter Fourteen

What the Gollum Said

Giving a little curtsy to her audience of bloodthirsty clouds on the western horizon doing battle with a dying sun barely visible between the tall buildings surrounding her own, Esther Brookstone sat down at her piano, reckoning that a bit of Chopin might help her decide on dessert among what was available in her refrigerator. Of course, Chopin's music might take either side in that battle between clouds and sun, so her indecision might perturb Nature's delicate balance. She opted for the maestro's "Fantasie Impromptu" to avoid that: Its two themes allowed both the sun and clouds to make their cases.

Like most human beings and even many of God's other fauna, Esther was often a creature of habit. That qualifier "often" allowed her to depart from routine from time to time, sometimes without realizing it, other times just to be different or obstinate. Bastiann van Coevorden wasn't yet a comfortable habit, though; she knew their long-distance relationship hadn't yet become the comfortable routine that would make many friends ask her, "Why aren't you two married?"

She would be his first mate, married or not, if their relationship became a comfortable habit; he would be her fourth, each one having become a comfortable habit that had enriched her life. She'd loved those previous husbands and had suffered greatly when they were gone, always swearing each time, "Never more!" as if she were Poe's raven, afraid that her weddings were only harbingers of deep sorrow that would be caused by a loved one's death. Yet the comfortable habit of sharing her life with a loving man had become more appealing now when she considered that she might be the one this time leaving this mortal coil before Bastiann.

That led her to recall something *a propos* from Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. *What had the Gollum said? Ah yes, that evil creature had posed a riddle the little Hobbit had to decipher: "This thing all things devours: Birds, beasts, trees, flowers...." Yes, time would be most people's enemy. One never knew how much time they had left. Was that worse than not knowing what came after? Why search again for a lasting and loving relationship now when there might be so little time left?*

Once we are born, everything that remains in our lives is an unknown. And with Bastiann and my professions, one could argue that the danger of a short life, while possibly exciting and full of adventure, might be less attractive than a long if boring life where danger was minimized. Many people would be satisfied to just die quietly in their sleep at ninety after a long but boring lifetime with a husband, children, and grandchildren and a few satisfying jobs that allowed one to pretend to be useful. Esther had made some of those choices, and time had stolen them away. Had fate been trying to tell her something?

She shook her head to clear it, ending her mostly maudlin reverie. *Another habit, Esther?* Profound thoughts, akin to those that had tormented famous and serious philosophers for ages, and other simpler ones, often plagued her when she sat down to play her piano. She'd inherited the instrument from an SIS colleague who'd been murdered in East Berlin. He'd been like a fourth husband, in fact, her very first, to be precise; she'd perhaps become too comfortable in his company, not recommended when both are spying on an autocratic state where living comfortably was determined by the whims of fascist leaders.

When she arrived home, she'd placed the takeaway Indian dinner carton on her counter and begun her customary multitasking, deciding what red to drink with it and going through her

pile of daily mail. Both tasks amounted to simple enough decision processes that she could usually do them automatically, but one piece of mail had halted those habitual activities. The envelope had “To Inspector E. Brookstone” scrawled upon it, without her address, return address, or paid postage. Her worst fears now arose about some sort of poison that might be therein—some narcotic overdose, anthrax, nightshade, or any KGB-developed poison the Kremlin’s mafia-like murderers loved to use—but that all seemed to be a bit extreme without a revenge motive; she knew no one who hated her that much. In any case, it had been dropped in her mailbox without going through the post, so the sender knew where she lived!

She slit the envelope open and carefully removed a note written in the same sloppy print:
My dear Contessa Sartini...

First error, she thought. She was still Ms. Brookstone, always had been, always would be. Her third husband would have been an Italian count by inheritance if his family had remained in Italy and Italy hadn’t officially done away with such titles—they still enjoyed an informal usage as old toffs from the previous Italian royalty tried to compete with those in other European countries—but Alberto Sartini had been a Swiss citizen when they married. Someone was taking the Mickey.

She read on:

I am your worst enemy, I suppose, because I am normally an art thief. Now I serve the rightful owner of that little van Gogh painting Mr. Steven Aldridge claims as his own. The painting he had was a fake, madam. In my rage, I threw ketchup on it. I provide this information just in case my action prevented you from determining that the painting was a copy. Sometime after Mr. Aldridge’s purchase of the real painting and its placement in his residence, the authentic version was stolen and was replaced with a copy. I still want to return the original to its rightful owner. If you locate it, I demand you turn it over!

R/Franz

A phone number had ended the note. She didn’t even try to call it. Instead, she would talk to Jaime the next day and let him take care of it. *Or maybe Ambreesh could help?*

That night she called van Coevorden instead. Obtaining more information about Wolfgang Suhr, or whatever his real name had been—she reckoned it wasn’t Reginald Matthewson, ex-gallery owner!—was a good excuse to call her Dutchman. She’d go to bed less lonely after the conversation.

Esther turned up the volume on her mobile to hear Bastiann after he answered. “Are you whispering for some reason, dear Bastiann?”

“Mais oui. Tres occupe.”

“Shall I call back later?”

“D’accord.”

She then was greeted by a dial tone. She was worried. It wouldn’t do to lose a man even before she married the bloke! They would both miss out on the fun of a wedding night.

Chapter Fifteen

In the Munich Suburbs

Franz Clauberg hung his overcoat on the coat tree and smiled at his uncle's nurse. "How is he today?"

Sofia Schultz and he had met at the *Neue Pinakothk*. They were both interested in art, her interest more legitimate than his. She'd become a geriatric nurse specializing in home care after tiring of the stresses associated with ER management and nursing in general and later because she'd made no money from selling her own paintings.

Sofia would remind most people of a lady Hobbit. Her features and proportions were model quality—he'd seen a lot of female models in art school that allowed him to make that comparison—but they were those of a miniature human being. Barely five-feet tall but padded in all the right spots, at that moment she represented most of the good left in his life.

"He's ready to jump out of his wheelchair and fight along with the NATO troops again."

"He's either not happy with the way things are going or reliving his days in the resistance. Keep his guns locked up."

"Always. I even keep the keys locked up. Keys to everything. I've only got my front door key and the one key for the storage cabinets. There are too many valuable things here in this house."

"Is he still working on his memoirs?"

"Weather permitting. He likes to do that on the veranda, typing away like a madman on that old laptop. Someone will have to censor it; I'm sure he doesn't pay much attention to state secrets."

"You're assuming someone will want to publish his ramblings. I doubt that, but I'll worry about it later if needs be. I've got other more important worries, particularly the one about something very valuable you know was taken from here and that's still missing."

"The painting?" Franz nodded. "Once again: Are you sure it's his?"

"He has no reason to lie about that." Franz shrugged. "I'd say it's either his or some other relative's who's probably passed on. Both his grandfather and father were art collectors. I believe the family's ownership's legitimate, although they couldn't have been the original owners, of course. Is he still prattling on about it?"

"My little van Gogh's gone.' He mutters that a lot, and at odd times. Other times, he confuses me with someone named Gretchen and wants to see the painting."

Franz nodded. "Gretchen was his older sister, my aunt. I never met her."

"He wants me—Gretchen, that is—to get the painting appraised. Wasn't it appraised already, and didn't it have a well-established paper trail?"

"I have secured all that paper trail. I just don't have the painting. I need to sell it in a legitimate gallery to finance his care."

She eyed him with a sly smile and suspicion. "Do you know any legitimate galleries, Franz?"

"Personally, no. I know some by reputation, though. Maybe I could sell the van Gogh for enough to get out of the business and open a gallery of my own."

"And pay me?"

He shrugged. He owed her money for three months of nursing service. He was always behind in paying her. He also owed her for some copies of paintings she'd done for him. She was

an excellent forger when she put her mind to it and otherwise painted quality originals when she wasn't taking care of his uncle.

“Our night games aren't enough pay?”

“They might be,” she said with a wink and a smile, “if they ever led to a more permanent relationship, you devil. You take advantage of me in many ways.”

Franz agreed that he was a cad. He also believed she stayed for his uncle, not him.

SAMPLE

Chapter Sixteen

The Gunfight

While Esther in London was making tea to calm herself—the brief conversation with Bastiann had left her a bit agitated—Bastiann van Coevorden was at a country manor not far from Bonn keeping his head down as the *Bundespolizei* squad exchanged fire with some gang members who'd taken over the abandoned house. He was never one to run from a fight, but the warning adage “Haste makes waste!” was bouncing around in his mind like the trite lyrics from some ABBA song: The corpulent German squad leader had jumped the gun and made an already difficult situation now nearly impossible. The Germans didn't even know whether their target was in the house, or how many gang members were there with him if he was. Moreover, if Willy wasn't there—Bastiann was the only one who could ID him—they'd be wasting their time.

Esther would call this a royal cock-up!

“I'm moving to the rear of the house,” he told the German agent next to him. The Germans' leader had moved before the rear of the house was covered, a major tactical error in Bastiann's opinion. Behind the manor house were open fields and forest. “We might not have this chance again anytime soon to capture Willy.”

The agent, whose name was Gunther, nodded and handed Bastiann a loaded gun. “I assume you know how to use this.”

Bastiann nodded. “If your reinforcements arrive, send a few my way. Don't bother to ask your leader's permission.” Bastiann knew he wasn't being politically correct, but he wanted a chance to save the situation.

He was short and built like a barrel with muscular arms and short legs. His most notable facial feature was a Poirot-like handlebar mustache, but staring into his eyes could be mesmerizing because their color was the blue-gray-green of the North Sea. He could move fast enough if he put his mind to it and still often skated on the frozen canals of Amsterdam when he had a chance. Staying alive to do his job was more than enough motivation to stay fit.

He often thought of Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* when considering his employer's connection with local and national police forces: Interpol's role represented the best of policing and the worst of policing, best because local and national forces usually did most of the heavy lifting, leaving more cerebral tasks like discovering international criminal conspiracies and tracking criminals operating internationally to Interpol; worst because local and national police forces had little respect for Interpol and tried to tie their hands until they discovered they needed Interpol agents' help. In summary, it was an unpleasant mixture of respect and disrespect that he'd had to learn to live with.

Good policing still was an inherited skill for him, though: His French mother had been an undercover agent for Surete, his father a detective in the Dutch national police force. He had met Esther Brookstone by accident, almost arresting her in fact, as she was pursuing some art thieves who were trying to finance an attack on the royal Dutch family. That attack had never occurred despite his mistakes. Apologies were made, leading to a dinner in Paris and a lasting long-distance romance that they both enjoyed while wondering where it was heading, art and intrigue often bringing them together, at least as excuses for a meeting.

Bastiann circled the house in a crouch, hoping a stray bullet from the gun battle wouldn't find him. He made it to the back garden. It wasn't a wasted effort either. After five minutes or so, Willy decided he'd had enough of the gunfight, so he exited the house's backdoor, gun in hand.

“You’re under arrest, Willy Baumgarten!” Bastiann called out. “Drop your weapon!”

It was mostly a bluff on Bastiann’s part: He couldn’t remember if Germany had signed the EU agreement allowing Interpol agents to make arrests—Bastiann’s agency, unlike Europol, was an international organization affiliated with the UN—but Baumgarten wouldn’t know the status either.

“That you, Dutchman? Stand up and show yourself!”

It was an obvious ploy to give Willy a good target, but Bastiann stood, gun ready. “I said to drop your weapon, Willy! Live to fight another day.” Bastiann knew Willy could run his gang from jail; he’d just spent almost three years doing just that. That would be a fate far better than death, especially if he got another early release for good behavior.

Sometimes criminals weren’t very logical, though. As smart as Willy was, anger controlled him, so he decided to take the shot. Bastiann moved sideways as he took his own. Willy’s zoomed past Bastiann’s right ear; Bastiann’s hit Willy in the knee, making him drop his gun, fall, and scream in pain. Bastiann ran to him, kicked the gangster’s gun aside, and put the handcuffs on. The Interpol agent then sat down beside Willy to catch his breath.

Not a bad day, considering, Bastiann thought as the drizzle abated and the sun came out.

Gunther’s reinforcements arrived and were soon joined by the waddling squad leader, Heinz Walther.

“Not smart, van Coevorden. Do you have a death wish or something?”

Bastiann stared at the troll. “This man is bleeding out. Did you think to call EMTs after you had your people out front rush in on the gang?”

Walther frowned. “We had to move in, or they’d be gone.”

“Correct.” Bastiann gestured towards Willy. “Right out the backdoor with no one to stop them. He was leading the way while they gave him cover upfront.”

“OCD on your part isn’t a reason for me to put my men in harm’s way. You play the hero too often, van Coevorden, and you’ll end up in an early grave. A hero, *jawohl*; but alive, *nein*.”

“Thank you for your sage advice, Inspector. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Willy interrupted his groans of pain to say, “You’re full of shit, Walther. And I underestimated you, van Coevorden.”

“Many people do,” Bastiann said with a smile. “At their peril. You’re lucky my aim was off. Not my gun, you see.”

“Mine was too. I aimed for your heart.”

“So did I.”

“We’re getting old,” the gang leader said between two more groans.

With that bit of agreement between international copper and criminal, Bastiann decided it was time to call Esther back.

Chapter Seventeen

The van Gogh Painting's New Owner

Yuri Dragunov was at a loss: He didn't know what to do with the van Gogh now that it was in his possession. He'd avoided making a blackmail payment by inventing a reason for an SVR assassination, but that only made the situation more difficult because he reckoned the British and other European authorities were now looking for both the painting and Wolfgang Suhr's murderer.

He couldn't pass the painting off as a legal purchase for that reason, which was what was needed to send it to Moscow in diplomatic pouch. He couldn't show it off at the soirees he often hosted at his London residence either. He could only look at it occasionally and admire the little gem, thinking that it was his and his alone. *One day I'll be able to make one of those Kremlin VIPs a bit jealous!*

Wolfgang had been a clever fellow. Yuri regretted ordering his murder. He could have turned the art forger and art thief into a good Russian SVR agent because the German knew Europe so well. But the idea of paying him blackmail had made Yuri so angry that he'd lost control. The Kremlin VIPs wouldn't approve of that character flaw and would most likely move him elsewhere, maybe to one of those African nations they planned to coddle now, in any case somewhere far down in status than London, a posting that ranked only second to Washington DC.

He'd worked hard for his current posting. He'd built a reputation in the international spy game of being a calm, clever and responsible manager. He'd had to ruin a few others' reputations to do that, but they were no longer able to seek revenge. And, unlike many Kremlin VIPs, he had no vices either beyond his love for art. *Will that eventually lead to my downfall?*

He'd mentioned his secret hobby in a moment of weakness when Steven Aldridge'd decided to brag about the personal art collection he was building. That British fop hadn't said anything about stealing paintings—Yuri had learned about that when he was perusing a *Bundespolizei* newsletter he often read because the Germans were serious competitors; that obscure newsletter described how the van Gogh had been stolen—but, at his request, Russian agents were able to trace the painting to where Aldridge's thief had sold it to that gallery in Denmark, fake papers included. Before Yuri could move to buy the painting, though, Aldridge had purchased it. Yuri had to admire how the fop's chain of crimes had resulted in the stolen painting to appear legally marketable once again. He'd hired Wolfgang to steal it from the fop's mansion, but now he was faced with the problem of getting it home to Moscow.

Now that Wolfgang was dead, Yuri realized that too many people were interested in the little masterpiece. They might have to be eliminated as well, just like Wolfgang.

Chapter Eighteen

The Visit to Amsterdam

Esther had decided that it was high time she learned more about the missing painting. Bastiann picked her up at Schipol. He was no art historian, but he was a fan of the Van Gogh Museum located in Amsterdam South not far from the Rijksmuseum, so she'd asked him to accompany her there.

Langston had given her permission to go—she'd failed in getting him to pay for the trip, but it was only a hop across the North Sea—and once inside the museum, the two found their way to Professor Vincent Hoph's dark and foreboding office located in the building's basement after asking many different staff members where it was. Consequently, Bastiann arrived there annoyed and Esther delighted with the short, unexpected tour that included dark corridors and laboratories where experts were busily appraising and restoring paintings by van Gogh and other Dutch masters, and not just for the museum.

"The Rijksmuseum is more impressive and traditional," he said as they took seats in the professor's little office to wait for him.

"The exhibit spaces are typically European there: Dark, old, and crowded," Esther said. She'd seen both only as a gawking tourist on another man's arm, her second husband Alfred, who'd also been a professor of art history. All van Gogh's paintings she'd seen here didn't impress her as much as Rembrandt's huge "The Night Watch," but she was biased towards the old masters. "Someday I'd like to own my own gallery and laboratory where I could appraise, authenticate, and restore old paintings."

"Are you planning to retire?"

"The Yard might insist. Or, when the time is right. Ah, here's our erudite professor."

It could be said that most of the museum's staff knew more about Vincent van Gogh than many art experts, but Vincent Hoph was *the expert*. He taught art history at the local university as well as being a consultant for the museum, and he'd written many scholarly papers about the famous artist and his paintings.

The professor's fame was larger than he was; even Bastiann towered over the little man. Esther thought he could well be cast as the dwarf-hero in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, at least for his appearance. It was almost comical when the two men were seated and twisted their handlebar mustaches at the same time, but she kept a straight face. And the professor had shaken both their hands heartily in welcome as if he were trying to get water from an old rural pump, so he was no misogynist. *In fact, is this old man undressing me with his eyes?*

He was all business, though. "The problem with old Vincent is that there exist many legends and myths about him," Hoph began what Esther had come for: Information about the painter and the painting face-to-face with an expert in the field where she could use body language to tell what was hyperbole and what wasn't. "He's become somewhat a folk legend who's larger than life. I dare say, where should I begin?"

"We're interested in his early years as a painter before he painted his so-called masterpieces," Esther said. "We saw a few of those early paintings as we came through the museum just now." She handed Hoph a photo of the little van Gogh. "Early works like this one, Professor Hoph."

The professor found a magnifying glass in a desk drawer and studied the photo of Aldridge's fake *sans* ketchup; he frowned. "This is not a van Gogh. It's a fake owned by a British gentleman named Steven Aldridge. I learned about the real painting being stolen from

him in a newsletter I receive. Are you investigating that theft, Inspector Brookstone? You should have told me when you called so I could have better prepared for your visit.”

She took the criticism well, not being overly concerned by it. Lies by omission weren't as bad as direct lies in her work. “Yes, I'm investigating that theft. Which is why I want to know more about the painter and his paintings, this one in particular.”

“Enough to come all the way from London, madam. I'm honored.”

She took that as a suitable apology for his previous criticism. “Pish-tosh, professor.” She patted Bastiann's shoulder. “My trip has also allowed me to visit my friend here. He's a great fan of this establishment.”

“Van Coevorden? That's Dutch. Where do you live, Mr. van Coevorden?”

“I'm a tale of two cities, professor: Living right here and in Lyon. I work for Interpol.”

“I see.”

Esther let Hoph assume that Bastiann was also involved in the case, hoping the involvement of a fellow Dutchman who worked for Interpol would work in her favor.

They talked for nearly another hour, during which Esther and Bastiann learned that there was a huge gap between when the real painting had disappeared before the Second World War and when Aldridge supposedly purchased it in Denmark. They also learned that the gallery in Denmark was quite reputable, so Hoph assumed the papers for the painting were legitimate.

Esther was happy Bastiann have been available. The little tidbits she'd learned from the professor would have hardly been worth the trip otherwise!

“I'm proud of you,” Bastiann said as he drove Esther to Schipol the next morning.

“For my performance last night, my Dutchman? It'd been a while. Too long if I'm honest.”

He laughed and flashed her a brief but sly wink. “No, for letting Hoph finish his spiel without too many interruptions. I'm sure you knew some more details that he glossed over.”

“He probably thought I had a plane to catch. He's written a book about van Gogh. I could have just read that, in fact, but we'd not have learned any specifics about our little van Gogh painting.” She glanced at him. “And our meeting him was an excellent excuse to see you again, Bastiann.”

“Langston's a good detective. He probably figured that out.”

“Indeed. Probably why he wouldn't pay for the trip. But he's tried to outmaneuver me before and regretted it. Honestly, I did want to see if Hoph had any information about the painting. I now know I need to focus on how that gallery in Denmark came to have it and legally market it.”

“I bet you have a theory.”

“I do, and I want to confirm it: I feel in my gut that there's another art thief involved who originally stole the painting; developed a fake paper trail for it; and then sold it to that gallery as its legitimate owner, leaving them to market it and him scot free.”

“And maybe your Steven Aldridge started that whole process by placing an order to that unknown art thief? In any case, you'd need to find the original owner to sort things satisfactorily.”

“Um, your little addition might complicate my theory and the associated tasks to prove it, so you must continue to help me. In your grand Interpol databases, could you trawl a bit to see if any van Gogh from a private collection has been stolen in the last few years? You can trawl where neither I nor my detectives can. I can do the rest. Look out!”

The SUV in the parallel lane brushed against Bastiann's vehicle. He fought to maintain control but lost the battle. The car slammed into the guard rail and flipped onto its side. They crawled out just in time. The gas tank exploded, and his car became engulfed in flames.

"That was a close call sent our way by the Grim Reaper," she said.

"And intentional, so maybe he's innocent." He took out his mobile and made a few short calls; she waited. "Never saw the plate, damn it!" she heard him say. He rarely swore, but he had every right to be upset.

"I don't know who you called, but let's get our stories straight," she said when he seemed finished.

"What stories? There's only one: Some arse tried to kill us!"

"That part's okay to tell the transit police; our credentials should do the rest. But how do we explain what we're doing here in Amsterdam?"

"Last night or yesterday?"

She smiled. "Let's not talk about either one. I don't want your local or national police involved, especially not in our private lives. We're just two old friends who planned to see the tulips and got deterred by this late spring's bad weather."

"They'll think that's crazy. Sane people would check to see if the tulips were blooming."

"So, dear Bastiann, let's convince them we're insane people."

"I'm Dutch, as you so often remind me. They'll wonder why I didn't know whether the tulips were blooming."

"No, they won't. You're an insane Dutchman, remember."

Chapter Nineteen

An Old Man's Memories

"You're reliving those days spent in hiding again, aren't you, Josef?" Sofia said to Franz's uncle as she came in from a bit of weeding outside.

The old man's wrinkled face had been turned towards the house's lovely back garden, but the eyes had been unseeing.

"One of those geriatricians who sees me was amazed at how good my memory is, Sofia, but I often wish I had dementia so I could forget those awful days. And we only heard about what was going on secondhand."

"You were young then and shouldn't have had to hear about such events even secondhand."

"I suppose. I was curious, though, and wanted to know what the grown-ups were discussing, so I listened without them knowing. But as the war continued, things worsened, and our father insisted that we hear about the atrocities being committed. Our elders might have thought they'd be caught and sent to the camps, so they wanted the youngsters to tell the world about what the Nazis were doing to us so it would never happen again."

"I understand. You must abhor the far-right movement's resurgence in Europe now."

"So far, they're just a very loud but small minority. And it seems that all these new immigrants are becoming their scapegoats now, not Jews, not that I'd wish any group to be victims of a new holocaust."

"I'm sorry you're tormented by such memories, Josef. Can you think more positively? You've had a good life, and you've created marvelous medical devices that have helped so many people."

He sighed. "That was always my goal, not becoming rich but helping people. One day all my patents will be worthless because better equipment will replace mine. At least I hope that's what will occur. I certainly don't want the world to go to hell again."

She frowned. "I'm afraid that's something we can't do much about. At least the Soviets are gone."

"But the Russians are still there, and they're probably still just as anti-Semitic too. Look at what Stalin did to our people. Everyone hates Jews."

"Not everyone, Josef. Now, just think about your paintings. Art shows us that there's beauty and love in the world."

"Perhaps, despite all the hatred." He seemed lost for a moment, but then continued. "Where's Franz? He hasn't visited in a while. You two should marry, start a family."

She blushed. "Why do you say that?"

"I think Franz likes you. The lad travels too much, so I worry about him. If he had a family, perhaps he'd stay here at home more. He says he's trying to find my van Gogh, but he traveled a lot even before it was stolen."

"He'll return soon enough, Josef." She decided to change the conversation a bit. "In a sense, I'm only his employee. And you know what they say about workplace romances." She winked at the old man.

He now laughed. "This house isn't a damn factory! Don't you miss Franz? I do."

"*Ja*, it's better when he's here. You two get along so well."

"He's a smart lad, my only living relative now. And he has a zest for living. Have you noticed that?"

“Of course. And I can see it in his art.”

“On which he should spend more time.”

She nodded. *Yes, he should. And more time with me.*

SAMPLE

Chapter Twenty

The First Heist

Esther returned to London, and that evening Bastiann called. He'd found several possible art heists of interest in an Interpol database, each one occurring in a different European city. "I think the one that occurred in Munich is our best bet, but I'll send you the list. You'll have to refer to the local police in those cities or call those affected directly."

"I owe you a nice dinner."

"Yes, you do. But I bet George won't let me collect my reward anytime soon unless I can invent some reason to visit London. Love you, Esther."

She heard the dial tone. *That's a first! Has it become love for him? What an old romantic!*

When the list came through as a text attachment to his email, she struggled a bit—she still had problems with the new system—but she managed to print it out. She saw the item corresponding to Munich and dialed the number. She spoke German like a native because of her work in Berlin for MI6, so she used that language when a woman answered.

"Allo. I'm Inspector Esther Brookstone calling from London. With whom am I speaking?"

"I'm Sofia Schultz, Herr Josef Clauberg's nurse. How can I help you, Inspector?"

"It's about a stolen painting. Perhaps Herr Clauberg reported the theft?"

"That's correct. Don't tell me you've found it in London? He'll be so pleased!"

"No, Frau Schultz. Not yet. But perhaps either you or Herr Clauberg can add to the scant information I have available?"

"It's Fraulein, but please, just call me Sofia. I will do my best because my patient isn't all there some days. He's in good physical health; but mental health, while good most of the time, can be off some days. Besides, he's napping now, and I don't want to disturb him."

"Understood. What do you know about the loss of his painting?"

Sofia explained as much as she could about the history of the painting and how they'd broken into the house and stolen it. "That little van Gogh was the favorite in his little collection of paintings they saved from the Nazis."

"And saved themselves as well. Quite a story! So, the thief didn't leave a fake in its place?"

"No, and the *Bundespolizei* have lost interest, I believe. They think it's out of the country now."

Somehow the van Gogh made it from Munich to Copenhagen, Esther thought, and acquired fake papers along the way. Would that "reputable gallery" in Denmark tell her who sold them the painting?

A phone call would be easier than making another trip, one that she'd have to also pay for.

The owner of the gallery in Copenhagen that had sold Aldridge the painting, Otto Jensen, fortunately spoke perfect English; Esther knew a bit of Dutch even before meeting Bastiann, but Danish just confused her. "An agent representing the painting's owner sold us the painting and provided papers for it, Inspector Brookstone."

"Would the German *Bundespolizei* know that, Mr. Jensen?"

“I-I don’t know why they would. Or even be interested. All the paperwork was checked. We even talked to the owner. The British buyer was quite satisfied. Are you implying that the painting was stolen?”

“I know it was stolen.”

“I’ll need to see proof of that.”

She couldn’t blame the bloke even though she’d sent along an image of her credentials attached to an email. *Maybe that attachment process had failed?* Considering the topic included art fakery, it wasn’t surprising the man might think her credentials were fake. “I’ll send you the information. Please review it and then call me. I will need both that agent’s name and the name of the person who you think was the legitimate owner.”

“I’ll have to bring in our local authorities. This is terrible! Our reputation might suffer!”

“You do that. I will inform your local authorities as well as the German *Bundespolizei*, so all the records are sorted correctly. With the names of that agent and supposed owner, they can interrogate them, assuming they can be found now. We need to return the painting to its rightful owner, Mr. Jensen.”

“But so much money has changed hands!”

“Indeed. That also must be sorted, but my main goal is to return the painting to its rightful owner. Let me ring off and send you the information I promised and begin my calls.”

Chapter Twenty-One

The Vise Closes

After making her calls to the appropriate European authorities and reporting to Sofia Schultz about the progress made, Esther decided to let the former pursue the case on the continent while her small team continued to work at the London end. The Europeans could only provide information at best because the painting had obviously left the continent, but that information might be damning for Staven Aldridge or some other local toff!

Unfortunately, their “local case” took an unwelcome turn, thanks to MI5’s tech guru, Ambreesh Singh. “I thought you might like to see a video clip made during a stakeout at the Russian Embassy,” Ambreesh said in a mobile text. “You’ll recognize the man making a visit.”

It was Wolfgang Suhr. Working with Ambreesh a bit more, they learned that he was there to see the scientific attaché, Yuri Dragunov. Was Wolfgang dealing in scientific secrets as well? From what she knew, the art thief and forger wasn’t much of a scientist beyond the techniques used in his criminal activities. After some more digging from her team, they learned that Yuri was well known at art events as well, always treated like an honored guest from the diplomatic corps.

Yuri Dragunov in a sense had a relationship with Putin and the Kremlin because he was the scientific attaché at the Russian embassy. Fortunately, that meant he was in the UK, not Russia. Unfortunately, it also meant that he had diplomatic immunity unless he’d committed a very serious crime in the UK.

Esther sent all the information to John Rawlins and then conferred with him about how to proceed.

“Our two cases have now become part of a national one with international overtones, Esther. I’m becoming a bit nervous. Are we obligated to seek higher powers’ blessings?”

“That’s never stopped me, but I can understand your worries. I’m nearer to retirement than you are, and I’ve never worried about stepping on VIPs’ toes. But I have used an MI5 agent as a consultant, so I wouldn’t want to prejudice him.”

“Interesting. Considering the international aspects, perhaps it’s best to go all the way to the top.”

“The PM?”

Rawlins laughed. “We couldn’t get past his PA! No, I was thinking of the Home Secretary and related VIPs. Our immediate superiors would be worthless if we’re honest.”

“I agree with everything you’ve said.” Although she thought Langston might not be worthless. “Do you have an easy way to set that up?”

He sighed. “Not really. Not without going through my immediate superiors. You?”

It was Esther’s turn to sigh. “I know an MI5 VIP. He handles domestic terrorism and things related to that. My contact works for him, but his boss is okay albeit a stuffed shirt at times. In any case, he has the Home Secretary’s ear, and I have his. We knew each other in different circumstances.”

“An old beau?”

“No, a work relationship I can’t talk about.”

“Um, so try to use him to push this case up the ladder then. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll have to try something else.”

Esther had her doubts, but Jeremy Brand surprised her. He took the bull by the horns and spoke to the Home Secretary.

The meeting with the Home Secretary went nowhere fast. Brookstone and Rawlins had attended as representatives of the Yard, but only because they had the criminal cases pending related to Dragunov; otherwise, Special Branch would have been there instead. Ambreesh Singh was present too, representing MI5 and acting as a technical consultant. Gordon Ramsey from the Foreign Office—his real position was a mystery to Esther, but he had something to do with embassies and consulates—and he most likely also represented MI6, just in case foreign intelligence sources became an issue. And of course, that bloviating fat bastard, Harold Hunt, the Home Secretary's righthand man, had taken charge of the meeting. No one seemed to know what to do about Dragunov, though.

To be honest, Esther didn't much care about the Russian. She only wanted to know if the van Gogh was still in the UK. After the meeting, she'd return to base because she'd decided to continue to pester Steven Aldridge. That process wasn't made any easier when considering that Aldridge, Ramsey, and Hunt were all good friends. *Ah, our lovely bureaucracy's slimy web woven by political prats!*

Fortunately, Hunt occupied himself by running the meeting with Ramsey's help—rather Ramsey competed with Hunt, and vice versa. At first that competition was a nice diversion, but she soon tired of it. By the time she needed to leave, though, it had been decided that Dragunov must go free unless they could somehow find some concrete evidence to connect him to Wolfgang's murder. Esther had been afraid the other prats might realize that—Ambreesh probably already had—and realize that only she or Rawlins could possibly find that evidence. Esther hoped that leaving Rawlins alone at the meeting, they would focus on him and forget about her. Sometimes it was beneficial to be the only woman in the group.

Now, she just wanted to know for sure where the painting was located, recover it, and return it to its rightful owner, Josef Clauberg.

When Esther returned to her office, Caitlin and Jaime were waiting for her.

"We've found something that's a bit odd, Esther," Caitlin said. "Jaime and I came across two independent pieces of evidence indicating the same thing: Josef Clauberg has a nephew, Franz, and he's got form for being an art thief and forger. No recent convictions, though."

She smiled. *Another one! So that's who Franz is! Maybe a reformed art thief and forger like Toby?*

She called Sofia again. Without letting on that she knew what the nephew once did for a living—or was still doing, because she didn't have many details, after all—Esther asked the nurse if she could talk to Franz about a few things.

"I'm sorry, Inspector. Franz isn't here in Munich now. He travels a lot. In fact, he had some business in your country to attend to. Let me give you his mobile number."

After a few more pleasantries—this nurse seemed to be a very nice lady—Esther rang off and dialed the number. It went to voice mail, and she didn't leave a message.

Esther called Caitlin and Jaime back into her office. "We need to talk to this Franz Clauberg. He's here in this country according to the person I just called. Let's find him."

"We guessed he might be involved in all this mess," Jaime said.

"I'm afraid you might have guessed correctly." *Had Franz put the ball in play for Aldridge or Dragunov? Had he killed Wolfgang?*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Munich

Sofia hadn't told the English detective the whole story. She'd justified that by thinking that she hardly knew Inspector Brookstone, so the woman had no business knowing about her private life. In particular, she hadn't mentioned Franz's last visit...

Sofia opened the door to the bedroom that served as Franz's studio and saw the painting sitting on the easel. She turned to Franz. "You've received another order, haven't you?"

"No. Take a look."

She walked across the room, winding through Franz's mess of art materials, and stared at the painting. The anger that had been on her face turned into a smile.

The style was impressionistic; the colors were bright and pure—the painting had been applied without and secondhand retouching, and there was an overall emotional aura, somehow both happy and sad. The seated woman hugged herself, her arms almost hiding her naked breasts; a linen sheet covered her thighs and waist almost to her navel. Her smile was thin yet sensual and more mysterious than the Mona Lisa's. She turned to face him again.

"I never posed for this!"

He touched his forehead with a forefinger. "It's all here in my imagination."

"So, this painting isn't to be used in an art theft?"

"Of course not. It's a gift for you. I just have to give it a frame."

She blushed now, the paleness of her cheeks once like the woman's in the painting becoming rose-red now. "Don't you dare show this to anyone, especially your uncle."

"No one needs to see it besides us. Do you like it?"

"It's flattering, of course. You took off a few pounds, I dare say. Thank you."

"Sofia, it's you on our first night we spent together. We're both older now." He touched his forehead again. "But that image is burned in here permanently."

"And here I thought you'd broken your promise. I feel guilty."

"I might commit more crimes in my life, but it will be for you or my uncle. Finishing this painting has convinced me of that; even if I starve, I'll pursue my own art career now."

"But the van Gogh?"

He smiled. "After recovering the van Gogh for my uncle, of course. But that task is more to right a wrong, to return that little painting to my uncle."

Aldridge waved the check at his midnight visitor. "Half what I owe you because you've only done half the job. Hell, maybe only a third. Who was this Wolfgang eejit working for? I want him dead too. And I want the painting. The real painting they've now stolen from me?"

"'Tis a complicated dance, sir," Drake said. "You want the painting. The original owner wants the painting. And the Yard and other authorities want the two people who coveted the painting, and the painting itself, of course."

"And that person who murdered Wolfgang, I'd add."

Thor Drake now shrugged. "'Twas the safest way to go. No witnesses."

"You didn't answer my first question. Who hired Wolfgang?"

"I'm hoping those Yard detectives will tell me. They're two DIs. One's the Brookstone woman, presumably intent on finding the painting you claim is yours. The other, whose name is Rawlins, is looking for Wolfgang's murderer, namely me. Neither is incompetent, so I figure they'll find out who hired Wolfgang for me."

“And will that recover my painting? I think not!”

Drake’s smile was more a sneer. *He thinks he’s the owner of the damn painting!* Drake knew that Aldridge would be totaling up how much he’d spent so far: First, to set up the elaborate scheme to steal the painting and create another owner and provenance for it; and then paying Drake’s retainers. The original thief who stole the painting was now in chains at the bottom of the Danube, thanks to Drake; his accomplice, an unscrupulous agent who pretended to be the original owner and his accomplice who’d approached the gallery, might be next on Drake’s list. It came to a tidy sum with a tab still running, but to far less than what the painting was worth and would be worth more with every year that passed. That difference meant he would probably keep Drake on the payroll for a while longer. *Job security*, the PI thought.

“And how would you learn what those two coppers know?”

Drake shrugged. “I provide full service, sir. That means I have people working for me: Staff, snouts, receptionist, IT man.”

“Competing with MI5, are you? Then why don’t I know who has the painting?”

“Only a matter of time, Mr. Aldridge. Patience is a virtue.”

Who said I’m virtuous? Aldridge thought.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Another Murder Victim

Yuri Dragunov awoke, wondering what had awakened him. *A bad dream?*

He had no love for the little van Gogh painting; he considered it to just be an investment that would never lose value in the future. This painting was becoming more trouble than it was worth, in fact.

Right now, it stood on edge in a wall safe in his flat. He hadn't yet figured out how to get it to Moscow. Via diplomatic pouch was out of the question. The only way he could think of doing it was to disguise it as some cheap painting he'd picked up at one of the many London galleries. Wolfgang might have managed to do that, but someone had murdered the art thief. *And he wasn't a very good forger, so could he disguise a painting so it appeared almost worthless?* Yuri was paranoid now and occasionally felt like just burning the damn thing!

He knew there were other wolves sniffing around too. He'd thought that Wolfgang had betrayed him when he'd made his blackmail attempt, but that clearly wasn't the case. Perhaps it was the unknown thief Aldridge had asked to steal the painting originally? Or maybe the original owner had someone sniffing around too?

Aldridge had imbibed a bit too much and mentioned the painting at a function hosted by the Swedish ambassador, portraying his purchase as just a normal transaction. Dragunov knew better now. Aldridge's business dealings were often illegal or questionably legal. He made millions selling security gadgets to Russia via roundabout routes, all illegal, after all. Russia's UK embassy and consulates used them too. Of course, Russian personnel ran everything once the systems were installed, so the Rodina had no problems with that arrangement that benefitted everyone.

But Aldridge was also a victim: His painting had been pilfered by Wolfgang. Dragunov had no idea who first had stolen it, and he'd had no knowledge of the ketchup incident. So, with the information Dragunov had now, his only suspects for Wolfgang's murder were Aldridge and the thief who'd stolen the painting from the original owner and sold it to Aldridge.

Dragunov was a patient man, though. Most Russian bureaucrats had to be. He'd wait and see if it all got sorted. In the meantime, he'd find someone to disguise the painting enough so he could get it out of the country.

Dragunov became more awake as he heard the beeps begin and saw the little red light blinking, Aldridge's security system telling him that the safe's door was open. *How?*

He opened the drawer of his nightstand and removed his Glock. *Where's Boris? Has he been sipping his cheap vodka again and fallen asleep?*

Russia's FSB and SVR had replaced the KGB at the end of 1991. Boris was now a member of the SVR, now supposedly the best of the best, so it was what the scientific attaché aka SVR-lead in London in charge of Russian espionage ops would obviously use for his personal protection.

He put on his housecoat and slippers and pocketed the weapon. Downstairs, he found Boris at his post. He was indeed in a deep sleep. The gash in his throat told Dragunov that somnolent state would now be permanent. *Der'mo!*

Yuri now made his way to his study. The entry door was locked, but he had the key. He used it, being as silent as possible, gun ready.

The safe was open—no surprise!—the painting gone. *But how?* He again uttered the Russian word for “Shit!” *This thief must be like a ghost, going through walls!* He took a step forward into the room, waving the Glock around to cover its entirety.

Too late the diplomat-spy-master realized his error. A strong arm encircled half his chest at shoulder level, pulling Dragunov back and making him drop the gun, and an already bloody knife clawed at his throat.

After Dragunov dropped to the floor, his assailant inspected the body. Satisfied that he was dead, he wiped his blade off on his target’s silk pajamas, retracted the blade, and dropped it into his coat pocket.

Thor Drake wasn’t much of an art thief. He was nominally a PI but also an assassin-for-hire, an efficient killer who did good work for anyone willing to pay. And he’d been doing it for quite a while, even for the SVR at times, so he knew how to sort things. Knowing that Dragunov’s masters would want revenge, he found the business card in another coat pocket, pried open the Russian’s clenched fist, and locked the dead fingers around the card.

Drake had no idea whether Aldridge’s guess was correct, whether Josef Clauberg’s nephew was responsible for all that toff’s problems associated with the painting. It didn’t matter. He’d be the one blamed, not Drake.

Chapter Twenty-Four Not a Believer

“I don’t believe it!” Esther said to John Rawlins. “The business card could just be planted evidence.”

“Your own people found out about Franz Clauberg’s past. And that nurse told you he’s in the UK. When it quacks like a duck—”

“Bollocks! You’ve been watching too many American shows on BBC, John.”

“There’s that threatening note from Franz as well. The evidence is overwhelming.”

“And all circumstantial. For all you know, the SVR eliminated Dragunov because he’d become too much of a liability. And that open wall safe still stuffed with euros is evidence that there’s another art thief waltzing around like one of Toulouse Lautrec’s ballerinas. He’s your killer, not Franz Clauberg.”

“Okay, let’s work with that theory. Who’s this unknown killer and art thief working for? I say it’s Franz who’s obsessed with returning the painting to his uncle. In other words, he’s working for his uncle without the old uncle even knowing about it.”

Esther sighed. *Maybe Rawlins is right?* She’d thought that if, as she suspected, Franz was close to Sofia Schultz as well as his uncle, he might have changed his ways. *Are you getting so old, hen, that you’ve become too gullible?* But she’d always been a person to heed her basic instincts, and her gut told her, even without knowing him or anything about his current situation with Sofia but considering he’d arranged for the caring woman to take care of his uncle, Franz wasn’t a murderer.

“Okay, let’s make a little bet, John. You pursue Franz, working on the Munich end of things. I’ll work on the London end. We now believe that the gallery in Denmark is innocent of any wrongdoing, but that’s where Aldridge first came on the scene, at least publicly. I don’t trust him, so I won’t be happy until I can prove he’s innocent. I’m betting he’s no different than Dragunov, an art collector who doesn’t care how he acquires paintings.”

Rawlins laughed. “Actually, it’s not a bad idea to divide forces like that, bet or no bet. Do be careful, though. Art theft is wrong but less violent than murder. Too many people are dying, Esther, even if most of them are thieves who are far from being innocent.”

After finishing her conversation with John Rawlins, Esther met with Caitlin, Jaime, and her three uniforms in their little incident room. She told them about what she and Rawlins had agreed. “We need to pursue Aldridge until we can prove he’s either guilty or innocent. We should have waged a full attack long ago. My fault, of course. In our division, we tend to think differently from the normal plods in Scotland Yard.”

“More genteel, ma’am,” Caitlin said, “which is appropriate for art, isn’t it?”

“Except when it turns nasty and adds murder to the mix,” Jaime muttered. “Many times over, in this case.”

“No matter how you spin it, it’s my fault. But no more! Full attack. I want to know everything, and I mean everything, about Mr. Steven Aldridge, from his days in nappies and potty training to being so rich he can buy a van Gogh, but especially about past and current contacts in the art trafficking world. Any questions?” There were none. “Jaime, keep me posted. I need to go brief Langston now. I’m not looking forward to it.”

She knew George would be more understanding than most bosses in the Yard. They respected each other and he was neither political nor demanding because the cases coming the

division's way were often unusual. It could be argued that a murder case was rare, but Esther could argue that Rawlins had that part covered. She still wanted to focus on returning the painting to its rightful owner, Josef Clauberg.

"If his nephew is in the UK, you'd better find him before Rawlins does," George said after Esther brought him up to date. Langston respected Esther's gut feelings; her gut had a good track record in the division, perhaps because she understood people just as well as or better than she understood art. "Of course, it would be better to find out how Aldridge managed to learn about a van Gogh on the market before anyone else did. I agree with you. There's something odd there."

"I was sure you won't pay for another ticket to Copenhagen," she said with a smile. "But I prefer to put pressure on Aldridge directly. I might need some protection from his friends in high places, though. Are you prepared to help me out with that?"

"Needs must, Esther. I trust you more than them because they're political animals. Even many of our fellow plods. You almost need to be to survive in the Yard, except here, of course."

"Yes, but we always must watch our backs. I'm counting on you watching mine."

"So...make an appointment with Aldridge to bring him up to date. In person. You can read body language as well as any detective; and we both know he's ignorant about art, so he can't snow you."

She was already standing at his office door, but she turned and blew him a kiss. "Please let me know when you plan to retire. I couldn't stand to work for anyone but you."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Contessa Sardini."

She smiled. Most Yard rozzers didn't call her that because they didn't know her history. Her disparaging nickname was Miss Marple, disparaging because they meant to imply she was too old, not that they admired her detecting skills.

Chapter Twenty-Five

An Important Clue

As expected, Aldridge had received Esther as if she were some flatulent hen in a lift. He seemed to be more focused on their investigations, though, than recovering what he considered to be his van Gogh. She wondered about that, thinking that it might be evidence for more involvement by him in the case than their scant evidence would indicate. That might explain his nervous body language. *Or he'd just had too much coffee?*

When she returned, Caitlin was waiting for her, accompanied by a young, uniformed constable Esther recognize as one of her three. She could only remember the first name, though, Karen. The young woman was excited, reminding Esther of when she'd arrived at the SIS training camp, eager and ready to put losing Graham behind her.

"I assume you have something for me. Let's go to my office."

Caitlin had already reminded her that the uniformed constable's name was Karen Pines, so she let her tell Esther her story.

"I was assigned the review of traffic cams," she explained.

"Bless your soul, woman. That's a boring job. And we don't have enough of them yet. What did you find?"

"Two hire-cars, one following the other. The first goes to Aldridge's, and its driver goes inside. The second one that was tailing stops back on the avenue. Its driver takes a few pictures of the first car and its driver. I copied the relevant pics from the camera footage."

"Good. What then?"

"Because that all looked a bit suspicious, I checked with the relevant hire-car agencies. The first driver's name is Doug Thornton; the second's Frank Bergstrom."

"The name's might be fake. Where were they from?"

"Doug's domicile was listed as Birmingham; Frank's as Paris."

"Interesting." Esther examined the pics. "None of the house?"

Karen shook her head in the negative. "I assumed we know Aldridge's mansion well enough, and these are taken from street cams, ma'am. They're only on the major roadways so far. I'm not sure they even have approval for surveilling private residences."

Esther had seen the time stamps on the blurry black and whites; a house pic would have shown her Jaguar! *Had she just missed meeting Mr. Thornton? Frank Bergstrom? A variation on Franz Clauberg?*

"Good work. See if you can find out if the names are real; that is, are those drivers using fake names. I almost met the one called Thornton. Not my lucky day, I guess. In any case, I want to know who the first driver was. I can make a good guess about the second."

"Franz Clauberg?" Caitlin said.

"My guess exactly, so while you two go after the first, check that guess as well."

"Do you think he's acting like a PI, Esther?" Caitlin said.

"Or he was going to visit that house too." *Maybe for a second time?*

Chapter Twenty-Six

Another Note from Franz

Late in the day, after Esther had spent most of it going over all the evidence, panning for gold nuggets, as she called it, she received another text message on her mobile:

“Inspector Brookstone, it’s time we met. I have more information for you that will help you return the van Gogh. Please come alone to...”

There followed an address for a warehouse in the docklands. Although the sender was again the mysterious Franz, his mobile number was hidden, just like it had been in the first message. She didn’t fancy visiting that area of London at twilight, imagining the warehouse to probably be a relic that should have been demolished long ago. She’d better bring backup with her. She buzzed Jaime Flores’s mobile.

She drove while he found out who owned the warehouse. “It belongs to the Russians, Esther.”

“What? What do they need a damn warehouse for?”

“To receive borsht and vodka without paying import duties?” he said with a smile.

She laughed. *If this Franz is ours, is he making a joke too? Anything’s possible. And Franz might not be ours and an SVR agent instead, meaning ex-KGB.* A frisson went down her spine as she gripped the wheel tightly.

“Anything wrong, ma’am?”

“I never was a fan of the KGB. Are you armed?”

“Rarely. Should I call for backup? I thought we were meeting Franz?”

“Yes, but which Franz? Josef Clauberg’s nephew, or some KGB-agent once based in East Berlin like Vladimir Putin who’s named Franz?”

He thought a moment. “I suppose he could be both?”

“You’re just full of cheer, aren’t you? Let’s hope that’s not true. My gut feeling is that it isn’t, but my gut feeling gets it wrong sometimes.”

They drove in silence. She had to toggle the switch for the blues and twos a few times on the way to find a path through traffic; but as they neared the warehouse, that wasn’t advisable. They had to park in an abandoned lot in front of the warehouse. As she feared, what streetlights there were either flickering or out, leaving the area obscure in the darkening twilight and the Thames a dark, polluted ribbon on the river side of the car park.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Reminiscing at the Warehouse on the Thames

“This will be a new adventure for me,” Jaime said to Esther, his torch joining hers to light the way along the path to the old warehouse’s entrance.

“In what way, sergeant?” she kept an eye out for any threats. She knew nothing about this Franz they would be meeting, and they were exposed. Knowledge of basic martial arts wouldn’t do them much good if the bloke had a gun he intended to use.

Training to become an MI6 spy had occurred in both the UK and on the job abroad. The latter had consisted of small tasks, each successive one a bit more complicated than the previous. The former had even included various versions of martial arts and how to mix them up to confuse opponents. Esther was a bit rusty now but remembered enough of those skills to put most assailants down if near enough to do so....

Lyle Priestly had handled her martial arts training when she’d joined MI6. She’d met him the same afternoon of her first day at the training center, a site she’d been taken to blindfolded, although she’d guessed it was somewhere not far from England’s southeast coast—there were noisy seabirds around and salt in the stiff breezes.

Lyle belied his surname. That Cockney bloke’s swearing would have made Eliza Doolittle blush, and he often added obscene gestures to his ample vocabulary of swear words. She learned soon enough not to be distracted by either. In fact, she practiced the German versions she was learning in her intensive language lessons. French and Italian as well, but the emphasis was on the German, the highest of the high and lowest of the low for the latter language because no one knew whether she’d have to impersonate the well-off daughter of a rich Communist party boss or a lowly peasant visiting East Berlin from a rural farm.

At the end of her training in England, Priestly only surpassed her in strength, which she could often use against him.

“Good, good,” he said on her last day of practice just before she left for the continent. She helped him to his feet. They both would be sore as they downed some celebratory fruit juice afterwards in “the pub,” just a juice bar in the main house. “You’re following the eyes, lass.”

She nodded, “It gives me a bit of an advantage when I can tell what you’re likely to do. I’ve learned that, thanks to you, Lyle.”

“The advantage is that my superior strength becomes less important. In general, the faster your reflexes, the better off you are. Be super-fast and you can even recover from a wrong guess about your opponent’s next move.”

“How long have you been doing this, Lyle?”

“Since the Cuban Missile Crisis as we prepared for the worst.”

“You’re not that old!” She’d made a quick estimate.

“Cor blimey, hen, I’m looking forward to retirement. I already have my little cottage set up in the Lake District. Full-time twitching’s in my future.”

She’d once seen him taking pictures of some local birds. “You couldn’t end up farther from the Old Smoke and still be in England.”

“You can get lost in Scotland or the islands too, but they’re too cold for this old man. And birds don’t like the bad weather either.”

“Damn. And here I thought I’d be able to seduce you if we were nearer the same age, but I’m a city girl, as you know by now.”

He laughed. “And a good shag you’d have been, I’m sure.” As they walked along the hall together towards the juice bar, he added, “Might be my last chance, hen, so I’ll ask: What happened to your husband?”

That had told Esther that Lyle didn’t pay much attention to any student’s background. Their past lives shouldn’t matter in the field. But she didn’t like to talk about what had happened to Graham. His loss had led her to join SIS—no death wish on her part, just trying to forget a love lost.

“We’ll talk about it later.”

They never did.

SAMPLE

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Informant in the Docklands

A gun he intended to use? Esther thought, returning to current considerations after the memories of Lyle. *Franz could be an alias for anyone, art thief or SVR agent, male or female!* The latter would be a new one for her! A woman posing as a man? *Anything's possible!* And a woman just might prefer using a gun to anything requiring a man's brute strength and skills.

"Josef's nephew Franz is an art thief who might be claiming he's doing a good deed. Or it might just be an alias for a Russian agent, considering where we are."

"Or some other art thief? Times are so bad that maybe the thieves are in cut-throat competition? One could grass on the other to eliminate that competition, especially if the competitor stole the painting the first had been targeting."

She put a finger to her lips; Jaime nodded. They'd both heard a dry branch snap, so they extinguished their torches. They still stood at the edge of an irregular circle of anemic moonlight.

Someone crossed into that circle and waved at them. "*Allo* there. I'm Franz, and I'm unarmed."

That takes some guts, Esther thought, *if it's true*. She placed the accent. Husband number three had been Italian Swiss, but this man was either German Swiss, German, or Austrian. She knew all three languages used in Switzerland, of course. And Franz was a Germanic name. She stuck with English, even though she suspected she was finally talking to Josef Clauberg's nephew.

"Good. So are we." It was a risk to admit that, but he wouldn't know if she were lying either.

The bloke was dressed for the cold, wearing an overcoat, scarf, and gloves; but he also wore a ski cap and one of those surgical masks.

"I have important information for your investigation, Inspector. Who's your companion? You were supposed to come alone."

"DC Jaime Flores," Jaime said. "Your instruction for Esther to come alone was a bit ominous, Mr. Franz."

"Understood. Please pass me your warrant cards so I can inspect them."

Jaime took Esther's and handed them over. The stranger examined them and then returned them.

"You're a bit late with this information," Esther said. "A lot has occurred since Wolfgang Suhr was murdered."

"Yes, I'm aware of that. Would you like to know who hired him to steal the van Gogh? I've been able to probe places where authorities can't venture and use methods they can't legally employ."

"Confession's good for the soul, but we already suspect that person was Yuri Dragunov from the Russian Embassy. Did you kill Wolfgang and Yuri?"

"*Wunderbar, meine Frau!* The vicar's daughter still uses some religious terminology despite having been married to an atheist count. But I haven't murdered anyone."

"Don't make a big deal about a common adage, young man." A chill had gone down her spine, though. *He knows too much about me!* "Let's go inside and get on with it. It's too damn cold here to dawdle."

"Yes, this English climate is deadly, but I will only take a minute of your time. You and your inept Scotland Yard need help on this one, so I'm making this sacrifice to help you. Yuri

Dragunov killed Wolfgang; he had the real van Gogh until recently. You will want to talk to Thor Drake who works for Steven Aldridge. Have a good evening. Nice to meet you both.”

The young bloke melted into the shadows.

Jaime was busy with his hot tea and bacon sandwich; Esther sipped a double espresso with three teaspoons of sugar—*Mary Poppins and not Miss Marple*, she thought—and continued to wonder about how to proceed.

“We’ll need to find this Thor Drake, don’t you think?” Jaime nodded and continued to sip and chew.

She fell silent as her mind revisited many things in the opposite of slo-mo, most of them associated with her three husbands. Despite the cold logic she applied to her cases, Esther was a romantic. Life would be much too boring without some romance, and she was certain that there was something between Franz and Sofia now, perhaps platonic, but it was there!

A glop of brown sauce that splattered onto Jaime’s tie returned her to the present. Two things were clear now: One, if what Franz implied was true, this Drake had murdered Yuri Dragunov and stolen the van Gogh; two, this Drake had returned the painting to Aldridge, who wasn’t the original owner of the painting.

She smiled as she reached over to clean Jaime’s tie with a napkin. “I doubt that Thor Drake is his real name. Let me call Rawlins.”

Her colleague answered his mobile on the second ring.

She didn’t spend any time on pleasantries: “Does the name Thor Drake ring a bell?”

There was a moment of silence. “Not as an art thief, but that’s your purview. We’ve dealt with a bent PI and violent eejit named Thornton Drake, nicknamed Thor, on occasion, for donkey’s years. Don’t tell me he’s mixed up in this mess!”

“He’s mixed up in this mess.” She told him what Franz Clauberg had told them.

“Why didn’t you arrest Franz?”

“One, he left in a hurry; and two, what do I charge him with? I have no convincing proof he’s guilty of murder or even art theft. I do suspect he’s the ketchup man, he himself playing the role of PI to recover his uncle’s painting.”

“You’re much too trusting of an ex-art thief who has form, Esther.”

“Bollocks! That’s historical form. Maybe like others in the Yard, you look for an easy way to close a case as quickly as possible? Sometimes the obvious guilty party isn’t guilty, John. And don’t parry that bit of advice with your silly duck-quote. I’m not in the mood.”

There was a pause. *Did I insult him?*

“So...I’m supposed to be looking for Thor Drake now?”

“Up to you, Inspector. I think that’s what our race comes down to now. Keep me posted; I’ll do the same for you, as I just did. We’ll solve this case one way or the other.”

There was another pause. Esther waited for Rawlins’s parting parry. He surprised her again.

“We seem to be after the same person then. Perhaps it’s time to join forces, Esther. With our two teams working together, we can get more accomplished.”

She couldn’t see any reason not to do that.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The VIPs Meet

Unbeknownst to Brookstone and Rawlins, higher-ups in the British government had additional worries about their case. Jeremy Brand had many irons in the fire, so he was at a loss to know what the meeting with his superiors was about and hadn't bothered to prepare. All he knew was that the Home Secretary would be there because that VIP had insisted on his attendance.

Now, as the two of them sat and waited, he began to worry a bit because the only other attendee would be the PM who had to come from 10 Downing. Jeremy knew that there was nothing fashionable about that true head of the UK government rather than Her Majesty being late, although the bloke might use the excuse that the Queen had called. *Maybe she needed someone to walk her corgis?* he thought, creating a private joke he would never dare express in public. Like Esther Brookstone, Jeremy wasn't a fan of the royal family; but, unlike Esther, he was more patient with that dysfunctional and spoiled family because he thought the British people needed them to satisfy their addiction to pomp and circumstance.

When the PM arrived, he wasted no time on pleasantries, political or social, even though he was known for the latter to break the ice for the former. They all knew each other, after all; and that was fine with Jeremy, although the Home Secretary seemed a bit insulted. *Or is it because the PM went to first names immediately?* Both the higher-ranking VIPs had titles, so Jeremy felt a bit uncomfortable using their first names, particularly with the PM.

"The Russian ambassador is looking to create an international incident over his diplomat's murder. He's hinting to the press that the Russians are being kept in the dark regarding the investigation, and that we're incapable of finding who murdered Mr. Dragunov."

The Home Secretary glanced at Jeremy and winked, but he was completely serious towards his boss when he said, "If the reason for this meeting is to put a fire under British operatives, you should have asked me to invite some other people, at least the head of Scotland Yard. Jeremy's focus these days is counterterrorism in the UK."

The PM shook his head. "I've known Jeremy since he was with SIS. I trust him. I trust you. I don't know if I can trust that bloke from Scotland Yard."

Jeremy decided he might as well not have been in the room during that exchange, although he was a bit chuffed with what the PM had said about trust.

The Home Secretary frowned. "But his man Rawlins is the SIO of the murder investigation. How does that even relate to counterterrorism?"

It was Jeremy's turn to frown and inwardly groan. The PM had just explained why Jeremy was there: He was more than a friendly face; it was a question of trust. Others hadn't earned the PM's complete trust. Jeremy didn't even know how well the PM and Home Secretary got along. People that high in government often competed, for want of a stronger and more appropriate word, even though they were invariably from the same political party.

Jeremy tried to smooth things over before the PM launched an attack on the Secretary. "It's my understanding that the murder investigation is going as well as can be expected. Several countries are also affected, and, in a way, Russia's diplomat was probably responsible for his own demise."

"Oh? Is that so? Please explain that."

Jeremy only had the evidence from their brief meeting and a few phone calls for updates he'd made to John Rawlins and Esther Brookstone out of curiosity about progress in the case. He kept what he revealed to a minimum.

"I see. So, this Dragunov coveted that damn painting. Has anyone told the Russian ambassador that?"

Both the Home Secretary and Jeremy shrugged. *You could have asked that in a phone call*, Jeremy thought. He was now sure the meeting was a complete waste of time.

"I doubt anyone would have thought it necessary," the Secretary said. "It's our investigation, after all. And the Russian ambassador could have inquired about what progress had been made just like you're now doing. I suspect someone in the Kremlin told him to try to make a big ruckus out of a scientific attaché's murder to score geopolitical points."

The PM considered that theory. "Damn Russians! Of course, you're right." He pondered the problem a bit more. "So...who's going to visit the ambassador and explain the situation to him? We need to shut that bastard up!"

Both the PM and Secretary were now looking at Jeremy.

"I'm not volunteering for that." The implication was that he would do it if ordered to do so, though. "I'd like to suggest that Inspector Rawlins brief someone in the Foreign Office. That person can then handle the Russian ambassador."

The PM nodded. "That's a reasonable solution." He nodded to the Secretary. "You and the Foreign Secretary can handle that. Make it so sooner than later."

Jeremy just managed to contain a smile. By the time someone from the FO was ready to brief the ambassador, the murder case probably would be solved!

Chapter Thirty

More than an Art Thief

Esther Brookstone and John Rawlins's combined teams now made a formidable force that required a larger incident room. They'd found one, but it was still crowded with plods, some even standing or perched on desks that had been pushed aside or radiator covers. The uniformed officers got the worst seats, of course.

Rawlins gave her first crack at them. She looked around the circle of expectant faces. In a short time, she'd formed her own competent investigative team, and she knew his was competent as well. She was a bit chuffed. After all, she usually worked alone, but George Langston and Rawlins's superior had done what they could to help: Give them qualified people. Their intention was probably to get the case solved as quickly as possible, so she felt obligated to do her best with the people they had.

They both knew that a team's larger size didn't necessarily get speedier arrests. The phone call from Jeremy Brand hadn't helped ease those worries either. She approved of the plan he'd proposed and accepted it: The last thing they needed was to get involved in some international blame-game. They were sure that finding Thor Drake would bring the case to an end, though, if the VIPs would just let them do it. Others had their doubts.

"I can't see how to proceed," Jaime said to Esther more than the group. "This Thor doesn't generate a lot of thunder and lightning, Esther. He works in the shadows." Several of Esther and John's people nodded, including Rawlins himself.

"Then that's where we should go as well. You'll all accrue some practice in surveillance techniques. Our main target is Aldridge, not Drake, but Drake will lead us to nicking Aldridge as well. Forget about regular hours for the next few days. Prepare your families if needs must, but you won't be seeing them for a while during this final push. We're going to hand out tasks now, and that includes to John and yours truly. Caitlin Harris—raise your hand, Luv—she'll be POC who's responsible for keeping what we hope is an efficient but large machine well-oiled, meaning others should pass anything dealing with Drake or Aldridge to her so she can let everyone know about it and act on it if necessary. John?"

Rawlins stepped forward. "I'd like to explain why our main target is Aldridge: Esther has insisted that the ultimate goal is to return the van Gogh painting to its rightful owner in Munich. I concur. It might mean a lot of hurdles to leap over, even international ones, so we all must be patient. But there's pressure on us to find the Russian diplomat's murderer, and everything points to this Thor Drake. Let's also not forget that, in addition to being a PI, we believe he's an assassin-for-hire and therefore dangerous, and we believe that Steven Aldridge is the person who hired him. Our challenge is to prove all that, of course."

"Should we give a damn about who Dragunov's murderer is now?" said someone from Rawlins's group who'd raised his hand and received his boss's nod. "Can't the spooks handle that?"

Esther, who'd taken a seat, now stood because she knew "spooks" meant MI5. "Inspector Rawlins mentioned pressure. That's Russian pressure. MI5 and MI6's investigative techniques don't follow normal police procedures. They might handle the surveillance better, but we can usually stitch together the evidence we gather a lot better. But you're partially correct: I'm convinced that Drake killed Dragunov, but it's more important why he was asked to do that. The Russian had the painting Aldridge had originally stolen, which means Aldridge is probably

implicated. Yes, we can leave the international intrigue to the spooks, but we rozzers must bring the criminals to justice.”

There were now more nods, so Esther sat again, although she knew she hadn't said all that much. She could only hope that their combined efforts would produce results.

Two days later two from Rawlins's team spotted Drake in a Southwark deli and tailed him. He was arrested in a flat above a local chemist's where'd Drake had been staying with a woman. They arrested her as well to find out her story and what her connection was to Drake.

Esther interrogated the woman with one of Rawlins's sergeants; Rawlins took on Drake with Jaime. Caitlin still kept the surveillance going on Aldridge. Esther finished first. The woman ran a brothel that Drake often frequented. She claimed that was all she knew about him. Although she believed there was a bit more to it than that, Esther had a custody sergeant escort the woman back to her cell and went to watch John's interrogation of Drake from behind a one-way window.

Drake's brief had obviously coached his client on how to say “No comment” to most any question, with and without facial expressions that could run from a sneer to a silly smile.

“We have gone over a lot of evidence against you, Mr. Drake,” Rawlins said at one point. “The Crown Court will try you for the murder of Yuri Dragunov, scientific attaché affiliated with the Russian Embassy. You can earn some points, though, that might help you at your trial.”

“My client needs to see any offers in writing, Inspector,” the brief said.

“Do you want to hear the offers first?” Rawlins said to Drake, ignoring the sleazy lawyer.

Drake glanced at his lawyer nevertheless, who shrugged and then nodded. “If they're attempting to nick you for murder,” he told Drake, “it'll only be the difference between life in prison without chance of parole and with the chance for it. But satisfy your curiosity.”

Rawlins smiled. “Your brief probably nailed it, but here's what I need: Who hired you? And where's the painting now? Two simple questions, Mr. Drake, and I'm certain you know how to answer them. Remember, being caught in a lie could be prejudicial to your case.”

Esther didn't see how Rawlins might do that, but she could see that Drake was considering the offer and a lot more. She shuddered as she watched his eyes. *Is he wondering if he can eliminate all the witnesses? This man is a killer! Sod his PI license!* She wanted to rush into the interrogation room, slap Drake, and rescind the offer. They could get Aldridge some other way.

But Drake surprised her. “Steven Aldridge hired me, and he has the painting again, thanks to me. I wasn't the one who stole it from that feekin' Jew in Munich, though! Aldridge hired him originally.”

“Was that Franz Clauberg?” Rawlins said.

“Who the fuck is Franz Clauberg?”

Brookstone and Robbins organized a raid on Aldridge's mansion after their combined surveillance had determined the toff's schedule well enough to ensure he'd be there. They found paintings, both on walls and in his vault, but not the van Gogh. Aldridge wouldn't say where that was. He also denied that he'd ordered it stolen in the first place, as well as denying the hiring of Drake to steal it again. He insisted that he didn't know that Drake was going to kill the Russian diplomat.

“I’d let the Crown Court sort everything,” Bastiann told her at dinner a few days later during a rare visit to London for a different case. “You’ve gathered enough evidence to go to trial. For both Drake and Aldridge.”

“We don’t have the painting nor the original thief,” Esther said. “I’m not able to return the painting to its rightful owner, and that gallery in Denmark is still pressuring us to rescue its reputation by capturing the original thief. Neither Rawlins nor I can do that.”

“Um, you didn’t hear it from me, but they’re pressuring Interpol to take over the case on the continent. Maybe we will be able to do something? And we don’t seem to mind collecting cold cases.”

“Why will it grow cold?”

“Because the VIPs won’t give it a high priority. They won’t care about the gallery’s reputation, and there’s so many missing masterpieces that what difference does yet another one make?”

“It would make a difference to Josef Clauberg.”

“He still has his other treasures.”

“I’m surprised at you. Finding that van Gogh would make three people very happy: Sofia Schultz, and Josef and Franz Clauberg.”

Bastiann decided he should change the topic a bit. “Indeed, what about this mysterious Franz? Will he ever come forward again?”

“No one knows where he is. I fear Drake also killed him, and he’s somewhere in the Thames, weighted down by chains or something.”

“So, neither Sofia nor Josef have heard from him?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Not so far.”

“So they say.”

With that, the couple started to make plans for dinner and a show.

Epilogue

The Painting is Homeward Bound

Franz Clauberg had to wait several days until the police tape at the entrance to Aldridge's mansion disappeared to enter, fearing the tape meant that uniformed police were guarding the premises. But he knew the van Gogh painting had to be there. After going to all that trouble, Steven Aldridge wouldn't have been able to put it in some hideaway off premises where it would be difficult for him to view it. He would consider it his...finally!

Franz entered the house the same way he'd gone in before: Through a small window in a servant's bathroom just off the kitchen that had a broken latch. It was a tight squeeze that forced him to stand on the crapper with legs straddled, but he'd made it through tighter openings in his previous activities as an art thief.

He walked through the kitchen where'd he found the bottle of ketchup on his previous visit and began his tour of the entire house to search for the van Gogh. If not in the vault, where could Aldridge have put the painting? It had to be well hidden but accessible. As he walked through one hall on the way to the study, he noted all the paintings hanging there of lesser value. He then smiled. *Of course!*

That Brookstone woman might be clever, but rozzers often weren't as devilishly inventive as a crook like Aldridge, a man with a clever and criminal mind. He began to look behind the paintings that weren't in the vault.

He found it on the third try. The clamps at the back of that third painting, a nice landscape by a twentieth-century artist who wasn't famous, had recently been loosened. There'd been no reason for doing that unless another painting had been placed behind the less expensive one. He took that painting back to the kitchen table. The clamps turned easily enough, and he was able to remove the van Gogh.

Very clever, Mr. Aldridge, but not clever enough! Of course, the van Gogh hadn't been in the climate-controlled vault, but Aldridge probably hadn't planned on leaving it on the wall for long. *Or maybe he put it in there every night?*

Of course, Aldridge hadn't planned to be arrested either. *And not for art theft!* He would be going before the Crown Court as an accessory to murder. He might never return to his mansion. *The poor toff! He's probably worried sick now about his van Gogh!* The house and painting therein would have still been waiting for him if he ever got out of jail...but in what shape would it have been in? *Time to return it to its more loving home!*

Franz had the little van Gogh tucked under his left arm in waterproof paper that he'd found in the kitchen probably used by a cook to bring home fresh fish; he carried it as if it were a flounder that he was planning to eat. He could never tell Sofia or his uncle about what he'd had to do to recover the damn painting! He could never tell anyone. And he would have to make her and his uncle swear to silence as well, even though Josef was the painting's rightful owner!

Of course, everything he'd done had been for them all: For his uncle, Sofia, and himself. He'd convince his uncle to sell it eventually—he'd listen to Sofia's reasoning if not Franz's—and they could all live comfortably again like normal people, hopefully before that even occurred.

The English in general and that woman Brookstone in particular would forget about the case; the Russians would never be very forgiving, but how would they ever know? He was sure that not even those thugs in Moscow would ever have condoned what Dragunov had done. They

would be furious with him in fact, and the diplomat would already be headed to some Siberian labor camp if he were alive.

Despite all these troubling thoughts, Franz now felt better. Everything would be okay...eventually.

He entered the Morris Minor hire-car he'd parked blocks away and sped off into the night, still smiling about his success. *Will anyone outside his immediate family ever know what happened to the painting?* He hoped not.

That was the least of his worries, of course. Selling a hot painting wouldn't be easy whenever he thought it was safe to try that. *Uncle, you'll have to hold onto it for a while longer, even though I have all the required papers! Maybe Sofia and I can sell a few of our own paintings to cover family expenses? Or we can restore other people's art.*

A frisson went down his spine. *Will she leave us?* He might have to tell her everything, even about the double life he'd led for so long. If she insisted, he wouldn't tell Josef. *Let the old man enjoy his painting!*

As always, the future seemed uncertain, but at least there was hope now...and justice for his uncle. And he didn't give a damn about Aldridge as long as he was in jail!

Note from Steve

You have just finished another example of my short fiction available as a free PDF download. Thank you for reading this story. I hope you have enjoyed it. Because it's free, I'm not asking you to review it; but, if you like, use the contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>, to let me know what you think about it and whether you found it entertaining. Also, feel free to copy and pass it around to your family and friends.

And, whether you've enjoyed reading this free PDF or not, please check out the list of other free PDF downloads available on the "Free Stuff & Contests" web page at my website above. In particular, there's a lot of free fiction, including two full "Esther Brookstone" novels. (I can't publish everything I write, not even all the good stuff—the bad stuff never sees the light of day, of course.)

And please check out the longer mystery, thriller, and sci-fi novels from my Irish colleague A. B. Carolan and me (for descriptions and review excerpts, see the website indicated above):

From Steven M. Moore...

The following novels are all on the same fictional timeline...

"Detectives Chen and Castilblanco"

The Midas Bomb
 Angels Need Not Apply
 Teeter-Totter between Lust and Murder
 Aristocrats and Assassins
 The Collector
 Family Affairs
 Gaia and the Goliaths
 Defanging the Red Dragon*

"Esther Brookstone Art Detective"

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

*A free PDF download available at my website, #8 in the "Chen and Castilblanco" series, and #6 in the "Esther Brookstone" series—it's a crossover novel!

**Also a free PDF download

"Inspector Steve Morgan"

Legacy of Evil

Cult of Evil
Fear the Asian Evil

The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan***

“Clones and Mutants Trilogy”

Full Medical
Evil Agenda
No Amber Waves of Grain

Soldiers of God***

“Chaos Chronicles Trilogy”

Survivors of the Chaos
Sing a Zamba Galactica
Come Dance a Cumbia...with Stars in Your Hand!

(Note: This entire trilogy is now available as an ebook bundle titled *The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy Collection*)

Rogue Planet***

***Bridge books between series, the last novel provides a bridge to the Dr. Carlos stories found in several collections (see below) and to 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”

Muddlin' Through
Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By
Goin' the Extra Mile

Other novels...

More than Human: The Mensa Contagion
A Time-Traveler's Guide through the Multiverse

Non-fiction...

Writing Fiction

From A. B. Carolan...

“ABC Sci-Fi Mysteries”

The Secret Lab
The Secret of the Urns
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Collections (short fiction from both authors) ...

Pop Two Antacids and Have Some Java
Fantastic Encores!
Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape
Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape, Volume Two*
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Sleuthing, British-Style
Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Two*
Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Three*
The Detectives*
The Detectives, Volume Two*
The Detectives, Volume Three*
This Bee Can Really Sting! *
This Bee Can Really Sting!, Volume Two*
Castilblanco Redux Plus Two*

*More free PDF downloads; all others are ebooks.

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

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgments

Buried in the novels of the “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” series, readers will find various flashbacks and back stories, some about Esther’s work as an MI6 (SIS) spy, and others about life with her husbands (the ones before Bastiann). There’s also one where she aids a Northumberland detective in a case about an art heist. Despite all this, I thought it was time to write a bit more about her life in Scotland Yard’s Art and Antiques Division after her sojourn as its leader but before the events of *Rembrandt’s Angel*.

As such, this novella relates how I imagine that division works, focusing on art heists, art thieves, and art trafficking, but collaborating with other divisions if there are overlapping investigations. I repeat: It’s how I imagine how the division works! If I’ve made serious errors here in my little tale, I thank readers for being patient and forgiving.

In fact, this novella is a prequel to the nine “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” novels. (I’m counting the two also available as free PDF downloads, *Defanging the Red Dragon* and *Intolerance*.) Even if I failed at providing accurate details about how Esther’s division goes about its business, I hope the introduction of some main characters from the series’ novels was worth the effort of writing the novella; in particular, if readers’ interests in Esther and Bastiann’s further adventures are piqued. They turn out to be much more than 21st century versions of Christie’s famous sleuths, Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot.

However, this novella should probably be classified more as a police procedural and not a mystery/thriller like the novels, although there’s a bit of that flavor in the later novels. The first three novels were written before Covid; the last six during or after. That “police procedural” flavor has an interesting origin: To get through Covid, I often binge-read entire series of what I call British-style mysteries, i.e. the descendants of Christie’s novels written and published in the UK (the latter mostly by Joffe Publishing and its subsidiaries). Thus, readers might want to consider the “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” and the “Inspector Steve Morgan” novels and this novella as an homage to Christie and a resounding “thank you” to these authors and publishers of those British-style mysteries for keeping me sane during the pandemic!

I’m sure Dame Agatha might have had problems with Esther and Bastiann, though. Esther is much more energetic, flirty, and pugnacious than Miss Marple—I imagined that having a vicar as father and two domineering older brothers could easily cause that, not to mention her time in MI6. Bastiann’s genetic predisposition toward police work is also elaborated on here, as is his “man about Europe” nature—he’s a citizen of the EU, not just a Dutchman.

Some of the ancillary characters get short shrift here—it’s only a novella, after all. But readers can at least meet quite a few characters who play important roles in the subsequent novels. Again, an apology: In the novels, I might have introduced some characters without stating Esther had met them earlier here. The same goes for technology: The use of DNA and smart phones weren’t prevalent when the events of this novella supposedly occur, so I hope I made no slip-ups there. I believe I also didn’t erroneously include the 2013 reform that created the NCA and reorg for Police Scotland, a reform replacing the Yard’s Special Branch and creating the first to cover organized crime. At least I still include the British Queen and not a King! That’s the danger of writing a prequel!

Prequels are also problematic in another sense: I carefully aged Esther and Bastiann (and ancillary characters!) as the “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” series progressed, so a “reverse-aging” process seemed a bit daunting at first. Now it doesn’t seem to have been too much of a challenge, though: Esther et al still come to you as well aged at a stage in their lives when people

invariably start thinking about what their lives will be like as retirees. In brief, I only had to remind readers about what full lives the main characters already had lived at the time of the story, a period just before *Rembrandt's Angel*.

More than any other Brookstone story, though, this one supports Esther's moniker of "Art Detective" (that was created by Penmore Press, by the way): Several art thieves and art forgers are present in this short novella! That's not me trying to make up for not establishing Esther's *modus operandi* in the novels. Instead, it's me taking advantage of an opportunity to show how varied such people on the fringes of society can be. We have the good souls like Franz and Toby, artistic fellows who happen to go astray but later reform; and we also have bad blokes like Wolfgang who take a turn for the worse and continue on that criminal path. Barely mentioned is Aldridge's first hire whose skills also included forging papers well enough that he managed to fool a reputable art gallery in Denmark. We don't know what became of him, so not all mysteries are solved here. (They rarely are in a good story, especially in a novella.)

As usual with my freebies, I only need to thank my readers for their interest and patience, and my wife for being the great cheerleader of a crazy author who must continuously try her patience.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ, 2024

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.