



**Revenge at Last**  
 An "Inspector Steve Morgan" Novella  
 ...with Two Bonus Tales for You!

Steven M. Moore



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

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**...with Two Bonus Tales for You!**

SAMPLE

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While other stories of mine that might interest you are listed here in an appendix to this free PDF download, the cover is a mosaic of covers for the first books in multiple series that I’ve written, as well as a few singletons thrown in. For a complete list of my books and free PDF downloads, please visit my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

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### **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 story, but I might have missed a few...or included a few extras from previous books? 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  
 tippie—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

### 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

## **Revenge at Last**

### **Summary**

Inspector Steve Morgan and his team of police officers welcome new Deputy Chief Inspector Mark Hunter to their Bristol PD substation. His arrival coincides with a new murder case after a dead body surfaces at a pond nearby. The investigation into the victim’s murder leads to the discovery of a UK-wide and diversified criminal organization whose reign of terror began during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and expanded. But how does this new murder case relate to an old cold case involving the new DCI?

### Cast of Principal Characters

Harold “Harry” Bond—former Bristol PD DCI  
Denise Brockton—an arms dealer  
Keith Caldwell—director of NCA’s Bristol office  
Virginia “Ginny” Graham = Bristol PD forensic pathologist  
Carl Hughes—former FBI agent and now PI  
Mark Hunter—new Bristol PD DCI  
Judy Hunter—Mark’s wife  
Alice Jepson—Bristol PD DS on secondment to Morgan’s team  
Kanzi Kimachu—Bristol PD SOCO  
Akina Kimachu—estate agent and Kanzi’s sister  
Pat McGowan—a gang leader  
Steve Morgan—Bristol PD DI  
Sean O’Reilly—Abigail’s uncle  
Betsy O’Toole—Bristol PD DS  
Alex Richards—the victim’s boyfriend  
Abigail Turner—the victim  
Owen Wilson—Bristol PD DS  
Lowri Wilson—Owen’s wife  
Clarisse Workman—Bristol PD DI  
Gretchen Williams—director of the NCA’s Narcotics Interdiction Program

**“Revenge is a dish best served cold.”—old adage**

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### Preface

Good cops everywhere hate cold cases. If and when they’re finally solved, the police sometimes celebrate. Or, as in this novella, there’s a feeling of “revenge at last.”

This novella continues Inspector Morgan’s adventures that began in *The Klimt Connection*, the eighth novel of the “Esther Brookstone Art Detective” series, and continued in the “Inspector Steve Morgan” trilogy.

The old saying about “revenge served cold” summarizes both the title’s hidden meaning and that of the cold case that affected Steve Morgan’s new boss.

Enjoy.

r/Steve Moore

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## Prologue

### Near Sheffield, England, 2014

Detective Sergeant Mark Hunter heard the noise first. His new wife was still asleep. The wedding had occurred three days earlier, but Judy was still exhausted. Following the custom, her parents had paid for almost everything, but they were old and frail, so she'd done a lot to organize the event because he'd been finishing a case. Her job working as an ER nurse could get busy as well, but she'd had the good luck of having nothing more than non-critical patients for a while. *Or was that bad luck?* he thought. He still felt guilty about not doing his part.

He heard the noise again, and she stirred. “I’ll go down and take a look. Stay here, luv.”

He found his torch in his nightstand’s drawer—their small Sheffield cottage was near the national park, so the power could run a bit erratic at times, leading to those powerful torches in each of their top drawers.

“Be right back, honey.”

He used the torch to find his way downstairs, not wanting to announce his surveillance pass there if there was an intruder in their new home—it was a rental but it already felt like theirs. He kept the beam angled down until he got to the bottom where he decided that the noise came from the kitchen.

He stopped at the small kitchen’s entrance and moved the beam around like a searchlight to cover all its nooks and crannies. There was no one there, but the beam caught the open back door and the eyes of a cat staring at him. He nodded to himself. His new wife had forgotten to latch it. He stepped forward to shoo the cat back outside and close the door after it when he was hit from behind.

When Mark regained consciousness, he realized what had happened: He’d surprised a damn burglar! He dialed 999, left a message, and then rushed back upstairs. At the entrance to their bedroom, he stopped, but not for long. *To hell with forensics!* He cradled his new wife’s head in his arms, stared at her bloody torso, and bawled.

Later—it seemed like an eternity—he heard the desperate knocks on their front door.

## Chapter One

### **Avon and Somerset Constabulary, North Bristol Substation, 2027**

“What do you think about the new guv?” Owen Wilson asked Steve Morgan as they walked out to their cars that late afternoon, homeward bound early for once.

They’d just attended a late meeting where the Chief Superintendent had introduced Harry Bond’s replacement. Their old DCI had finally retired, they’d had the requisite send-off bash months ago for Harry at a nearby pub, and they’d been without anyone to protect the two DIs and their teams from the Super and other Bristol-area police VIPs far too long. Until now, when they’d met DCI Mark Hunter.

“He’s definitely different from Harry,” Steve said, not wanting to commit himself too much. As Owen’s immediate superior, the detective inspector didn’t think it was appropriate to get into what he actually thought.

To be honest, though, Steve couldn’t reconcile the Mark Hunter from their meeting with what he knew about him. He seemed to be less intense and more nervous than what his record would indicate, although Steve thought he was a steady copper who suffered no fools. Steve wanted to respect the man—the two DIs and their teams would have to work closely with him, after all—but could he shield Morgan and DI Clarisse Workman from the police VIPs’ well-known pressure tactics when they themselves felt pressure from the media or other politicians, the former often complaining about police incompetence, and the latter often worried about the next elections?

“He could be an improved model compared to Harry but more demanding and rigorous. You’ve read about him as much as anyone else has, I suppose. And now you’ve met him.”

“Hard to tell from just one meeting, I dare say. And he looked better on paper, although there was nothing there about his family life. Do you think he’ll respect our family lives? Even yours with Kanzi?”

When Steve had left Scotland Yard for the Bristol area, a good friend and colleague had left for Sheffield, so Steve had a bit more information than his team or Workman’s did: Mark Hunter wasn’t married, but he had been. Steve’s friend had passed on the sad tale that Hunter had to live through in the early days of his marriage.

Steve couldn’t help remembering when that hacker had attacked Kanzi. That had affected him more than when he himself had been attacked in the police substation’s car park. How would he have felt if Kanzi had died like Mark Hunter’s young wife? *I might have become a vigilante*, he thought.

It seemed that Mark Hunter had recovered well enough, though, to have a decent career and win a promotion to DCI, even if accepting it had meant he’d made a transfer. But he’d never remarried.



## Chapter Two

### Domestic News

Kanzi Kimachu had beaten Steve home again.

"What's the new DCI like?" she said when he entered their little cottage's main room to find her behind the counter separating kitchen and sitting area. He saw the usual plate of cheese and crackers, but she'd only poured one glass of white wine.

For now, they were only playing at being man and wife, but Steve had already met Kanzi's parents and liked them a lot, even though there'd been some trying circumstances surrounding that meeting. He thought the approval was mutual, despite their different cultural backgrounds, so everyone assumed that the two lovebirds would soon set the date for a wedding. Kanzi and Steve hadn't talked about that for a while, not since that trip to Newcastle, in fact, so Steve thought they were both comfortable with the status quo and didn't want to take a chance on jinxing a good thing. They'd both had previous relationship problems.

"Early days," he answered, using a line usually reserved for inquisitive reporters and demanding politicians who were looking for information about progress on a case. "Old-style plod in many ways, I suspect. You're not having any wine?"

Although Kanzi was dedicated to staying in shape and helped him do the same, wine and cheese and crackers had become a habitual lead-in to dinner, even if the latter was takeaway that one of them had picked up.

She smiled. "I have a surprise for you, Inspector Morgan." She stood; pulled up her jersey, the ratty one with holes she often wore at football practice; and patted her lower stomach area. "I'm preggers. In fact, the doctor thinks we're having twins. Early days, though. I've only missed one period."

### Chapter Three

#### Domestic Plans

Steve wasn't holding either a plate or glass yet, so he didn't drop them as he jumped up from the stool in his excitement. He went around the counter and gathered her into his arms.

“Aren't you going to ask how?”

“I know all about the birds and the bees, luv.”

“I'm referring to that damned pill! Doc says it's not foolproof. Accidents can occur.”

“I refuse to call our babies ‘accidents.’ Was that why you were having flu-like symptoms the last couple of days?”

She nodded. “I guess I'm a better detective than you are—for that, at least. I took some time off this afternoon and went to see my GP. Turns out I don't show much because it's early and I'm coming off football season.”

Their substation's team had just won the Avon and Somerset Police District's championship. Kanzi was one of the team captains.

“Hell, we celebrated into the wee hours after your last win. That can't be good for the babies.”

“I just had a half-lager, Steve. The rest was ginger ale because I felt dehydrated and queasy.”

“You know what this means, don't you?”

She eyed him with suspicion. “I'm not going to become a stay-at-home mother or join my sister in estate sales!”

“No, well, we can talk about that later. Plenty of time to do so. No, it means one, we need to set a date for a wedding; and two, your parents are going to be all over us, especially your mum. Even your sister, for that matter.” He laughed. “She'll be the oldest bridesmaid ever recorded.”

“Please. Akina would hate being considered old. And who will be your best man, pray tell?”

“Um, good question. I'll ask Carl Hughes. We've been friends since we were both in Afghanistan.”

“I like Carl, so I can pressure him into it by adding Betsy O'Toole as a bridesmaid.”

Hughes was an ex-FBI agent who'd decided to resign and stay in England because of O'Toole, Steve's other sergeant, and friction at the Bureau. Steve fully expected that Betsy and Carl were headed for the altar too.

“We can work out those details later,” she said. “But you haven't even proposed yet.”

He now got on one knee. “Will you marry me, Kanzi Kimachu?”

She laughed. “Of course. But not just because I'm pregnant. We both knew a wedding was in our future after that visit to Newcastle.”

“Damn right!” He stood and smothered her with another big hug and kiss, now feeling the old stirring that often ended their aperitif sessions. “Can we still...?”

His voice had trailed off, but she'd had the answer ready. “Of course we can.”

Much later, Steve awoke with her perspiring head nestled in his sweaty chest hair. *Damn! I need to buy a ring!*

## Chapter Four

### At the Police Substation

“You seem to be in a good mood,” DCI Hunter said the next morning after entering Steve’s office without knocking. He held up a hand like a transit cop. “Don’t tell me. I make it a habit not to pry into coppers’ personal lives.” He plopped into one of the two chairs in front of Steve’s desk. “I just came from DI Workman’s office. She briefed me on her current cases. Can you do the same?”

Steve had been expecting such a request, and after last evening’s news from Kanzi, he didn’t mind too much, although Hunter could just as easily read the progress reports from Steve and his team. But Steve was only partly through the briefing—he was adding some details, guesses, and opinions, especially about preparing cases for the Crown Prosecution Service, all of it not covered in the computer files—when his mobile’s ringtone sounded. He looked at it jiggling there atop his desk.

“It’s the dispatcher sir. I’d better take it. I’ll put her on speakerphone.”

Mark nodded.

“I’ve already sent the pathologist and SOCO team over to River Park, Steve. A dead body has surfaced in the pond there.”

“I’ll be there in five.”

“Take care of it, Steve,” Mark said. “We’ll continue with my briefing later. You might have an addition to your list. Keep me informed.”

They left the office together, Steve going down to the car park and Mark back to his office next to Steve’s. Steve met Betsy O’Toole, his other DS, and they left the substation’s car park together, the route ahead already mapped out in his mind. After living in the Bristol area for a while, he knew the port and its surroundings better than most natives. He only used the blues not the twos to encourage slow drivers to get out of his way and arrived at the park in just under five minutes as promised.

## Chapter Five

### At the Pond

Betsy smiled at him as they approached the pathologist’s tent. “Nice driving, Steve. Good thing I only had cereal and tea this morning, though.”

“Carl not up to fixing you a full English yet?”

“Carl’s in Manchester all this week.” Steve knew his friend Carl Hughes was usually the cook. “When he’s off playing PI, my lazy lie-ins lead to cereal.” She sighed. “Saves on groceries, at least.”

“While he’s off dining like King Charlie and passing the bill on to his client. Nice gig, I dare say. I see our favorite pathologist’s arrived.” As he opened the flap to the tent, he said, “I’ll pester her. You go bother the SOCOs.”

“Does Kanzi cook?” He nodded. “Then we might want to switch tasks.”

“I’m okay. We ate light because we got stuffed on leftover takeaway last night.” Steve wasn’t quite ready to tell Betsy the real reason.

Virginia Graham, their usual forensic pathologist at a crime scenes, stopped the ubiquitous Cossack dance around the dead body when he said, “We tend to keep you busy, Ginny. How are tricks?” He’d already seen enough to regret his deal with Betsy. *Thank God we ate light!*

“Body’s been a long time in the water, Inspector. I’m guessing she was weighted down and dumped farther out in the pond, but she popped up with the gasses from decomposition and floated towards the shore here in the pond’s outlet currents.”

The pond was artificial, created by damming a small beck that ran through the park, not worth the name “river.” Many locals in the Bristol area probably thought that practically anything less than the Avon shouldn’t be considered a river, and, in fact, the trickle of water that went over the dam’s spillway eventually emptied into Shakespeare’s waterway.

“Hard to calculate TOD for that reason, I suppose,” Steve said. “What about COD?”

“I’ll know more—”

“—when you’ve got her on your exam table. I know. But any educated guess? I won’t quote you, Doc. And I’m not recording.”

She smiled. “I’ve trained you well, Inspector.” She now glanced at the body. “A few days ago, maybe a week or two now, someone slashed this poor woman’s throat. I’m guessing not here. This was just a place to dump her, convenient for the attacker, inconvenient for the victim, especially if she wasn’t killed outright and was still alive and drowned.”

Ginny almost always gave out more information than he’d asked for—she was quite the gossip sometimes—but he groaned. They both knew the trail would already be cold. “Thanks. I’ll leave you to it then. Please send me an email invitation for the PM when you’re ready.”

“Will do. This one is going to be a hard case to solve, if only for the time that’s passed. Good luck.”

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Steve found Betsy, who was now interviewing the teenager, Damian Edwards, the young lad who’d discovered the body in the shallows. Steve shook hands with Damian, chatted for a few moments, and then let him go with the usual request: *Call if later you think of anything that might help our investigation.*

“Nice lad,” Steve said to Betsy as they both watched the redhead shuffle off. He noticed the gathering crowd. “We’ll need to go through the motions of a house-to-house among his

neighbors as well. I don't expect anything to come of that. Please organize it with our PCs, and I'll head back to look into the misspers files. We desperately need an ID for the victim."

"From what I saw of the body, it will be difficult to use facial recog. That would have done the ID otherwise."

He nodded. Sometimes Betsy stated the obvious, but she was an excellent detective because she didn't overlook details. "I don't suppose it will do any good to call out the divers to look for a purse?"

"And how she was weighted down?"

He shrugged. "I'll ask the new boss. He'll probably pass that funding decision upstairs, being here such a short time, and I wouldn't blame him because of the cost. Give me a call if there's news." He glanced up at the gathering clouds. "And watch the weather. It could play havoc with what little evidence we have."

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## Chapter Six

### Report to the New DCI

Steve was already looking at the misspers database when Mark Hunter dropped by from his office next door which overlooked the CID's open-plan area where most officers sat. Steve's chore was one he could have passed on to his sergeant Owen Wilson, but the DS was out working on another case.

"I suppose we're stretched even thinner now?" Mark said, sitting down again in front of Steve's desk. "New case not the case of a simple domestic, I presume?"

"Our preliminary analysis indicates a planned murder followed by a body disposal," Steve said. "But you've probably read that already."

"Indeed. Smash in the head, add some weights, and get rid of the body. The usual MO for gang violence, mate. I saw enough of that in the Sheffield area, and it's not even a port." The DCI thought a moment. "Do we need another team and DI here?"

"Sometimes, and more often than not, if only to shift people around as needs be to cover all the cases. But good luck getting it. I was a parallel transfer; and you replaced Harry, so Sheffield had to search for a new DI to take over your team there. Maybe we can get some more uniforms for Clarisse and my teams, but I'm willing to bet they won't be funding a new CID team here. Not when other local stations are hurting too. SOP our police VIPs will suggest: Grin and bear it, boss."

Mark looked frustrated. "So, how do they expect us to handle these situations?"

Steve smiled. "They don't, although they'll complain about them because the press and public complain. We must do something, of course, so we'll triage, to make sure we give more priority to the high-profile cases the VIPs want solved; make fewer arrests; close fewer cases; et cetera."

"'High-profile' meaning those ones they need solved to politically survive?"

"I'm not going to answer that question, Mark. You should avoid doing it too, I dare say."

He nodded. "Let me get one of the IT people to start looking at the misspers files. Come to my office in ten. You still owe me a briefing. After that, you and Clarisse can help me reallocate the work by prioritizing the cases by how we think they should be prioritized, not how Harry Bond and his style of VIPs would want."

"Without an ID for the victim, that won't be easy for the new case."

"You managed to pass on the PM's mother's murder case to Harry. Maybe I should take on a case to help out too?"

"Oh, the police VIPs would just love that. Their new hire thinks he's still a DI!"

Mark laughed and stood. "I'm nearly at the end of my career too, so I have no political ambitions. Haven't ever had them, if I'm honest, since my wife was murdered."

Steve's expression turned serious. "I read about that. I suppose that trail's gone cold?"

"Yes, they made it into a cold case," Mark said, but he tapped his head. "In here, that case is still hot. I still want to find the motherfucker that did that to her."

He turned and left the office.

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After the DCI left, Steve glanced at his watch. *Kanzi and her crew should have returned by now.* He called upstairs.

"How's it going, mother-to-be?"

"Are you alone?"

“For now. And in my office. Mark Hunter just left.”

“Well, be careful with what you say. I haven’t told anyone yet. And are you going to be a pain in my arse, Inspector?”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you don’t have to check on me—” She was now whispering, and he could imagine her looking around her area. “—all the time. My GP recommended a doctor, and I’ll meet with her next week. I just need you for emotional support and not worrying so much about my physical health. Besides, I’m in better shape than you are.”

He smiled. “Of course you are. Always have been, to be honest. You scored the winning goal in the police league’s championship game, after all.” He heard her laugh. “But what about morning sickness? You had it, right? That’s why you went to see your GP.”

“Leave it be, Steve. I need to process some forensics evidence for your new case.”

“What did your team find?”

“If you stop your blather and twaddle, I can finish my tentative report and send it to you. Jenny and Oscar found a weathered sandal and some old blood spatter near the pond’s shore, the first in the reeds near water’s edge and the second on the hard pan.”

“Good. Let me know if that evidence leads to anything. We need an ID.” He thought a moment, remembering the discussion with O’Toole. “Should I get Mark to approve funding for some divers?”

“You could try. The water’s a bit murky there, but maybe not so much farther out from shore. I bet that’s where they dumped her.”

“They’d need a boat for that.”

“There’s a boat shed on the other side of the pond. Oscar’s taking a look at the rowboats docked there.”

“Um. If there’s something there to be found, your team will find it. I’m thinking of a victim’s purse at the bottom of that pond: A driver’s license would settle the ID question.”

“That’s your argument for the DCI. And his to use for his superiors. Ta-ta.” There was a click, and the line went dead.

Steve smiled. *At work, Kanzi was all business!*

## Chapter Seven

### A Lovely Dinner

That evening, Steve and Kanzi met with Owen and his wife, Lowri, at an Italian restaurant just off the motorway to Cardiff. The invitation had come from Owen a few weeks earlier, so the other three couldn't complain about the ethnic food choice—everyone knew Owen liked Italian—and the restaurant was convenient for both couples.

“Any wedding news?” Lowri asked Steve and Kanzi.

Kanzi glanced at Steve; he kept a straight face.

“We're in no hurry,” she said. “It's good that only Akina is here on the west coast. The rest of my family would be all over us back east.” She patted Steve's hand. “They've all decided he's a keeper. I took some convincing, but so am I.”

Lowri laughed. “Yes, that's up to you, hen, not them.” She winked at Owen and then turned back to Kanzi and Steve. “At least Steve's not being pressured by a Taff clan like poor Owen was.”

“More from Siwan than your parents,” Owen said.

“Is she behaving?” Kanzi said.

Siwan was Lowri's sister and a local investigative reporter. She'd been shot not long ago for being overly curious, so Steve also wondered if she had changed her ways.

“I've still had to polish my big-sister act at times,” Lowri said. “She's all over poor Owen about the girl-in-the-pond case. Refuses to believe he doesn't know anything about it.”

“He's probably read about how it's going in the reports,” Kanzi said, “but don't tell her even that.”

“Aye, it's a bit embarrassing, to be honest,” Steve said. “So let's not talk about work.”

“Why I asked about wedding news,” Lowri said. “You two should just get it over with so you can go on and live your lives in peace.”

“We're living our home-lives in peace,” Steve said. “Our work-lives are too busy, though. Poor Owen has had to do some DI work at times.”

“Without the corresponding pay, I'll remind you. Overtime pay as a DI has to be better than overtime pay as a DS.”

“Sorry, mate, but I can't do anything about that. Let Mark Hunter get into things a bit more and maybe he'll be able to sort things better. I can see our patch sharing with another substation in the future, the way the population's growing.”

“With a possibility for promotions?” Lowri said.

“Or just more work,” Steve said. “At least we have jobs in this damn economy. That's more than a lot of people have.”

At that point their orders arrived, and they tucked into the feast, still Italian but heavy on the seafood, because Bristol was a port, after all.



## Chapter Eight

### The Rock Band

The next morning, Callum Porter knocked on Steve’s door jamb even before he’d gone through the critical email that included Ginny’s invitation to a PM. His door was usually open when he was there alone. Callum introduced himself. Steve only knew the lad by name; he was a new IT hire and the officer assigned to complete the task of going through the misspers files.

Steve gestured to one of the chairs in front of his desk. “Do you have something for me?” Callum’s right knee was bouncing up and down, and he glanced around the office as if he were looking for an escape route.

Steve smiled. *New bloke’s nerves*. He’d had his long ago. “Not very impressive digs for a detective inspector, I know. Did you find any missing persons who might match our victim?”

“Just one, Inspector: Abbie Turner.” He flipped two pics around and shoved them towards Steve. “She and her boyfriend share a caravan up in Liverpool. She’d come to the area for the day for some shore time and never returned. He called it in to report her missing over two weeks ago.”

Steve frowned. “How’d you get these pics? We just found her.”

”Boyfriend’s Alex Richards. He has a rock band. She’s their agent and accountant. Er, she was.”

“All in the family,” Steve said with a smile. He was trying to lighten up the discussion.

Callum didn’t understand Steve’s humor, so the nerves got worse. “The boyfriend regularly called downtown looking for news, but he finally gave up. Can’t blame him, I suppose. As for the pics, she was much more active on social media than he was, and not just representing the band—Facebook and Instagram mostly—but a lot of it was to promote Alex’s band.”

“Do you have their address in Liverpool?”

“I can send you all the information as an attachment to an email.”

“Add anything else you can find out about them, especially the boyfriend.” Alex Richards would be Steve’s main suspect until proven innocent. “All the way back to when they were in nappies. I’ll send one or more officers to Liverpool to give Mr. Richards the bad news and otherwise interview him and maybe his band members.”

Soon the pic, victim’s full name, Abigail Turner, and her small bio were added to the murder board; a piece of yarn connected her pic to Alex Richard’s minimal information. Where had she gone to get herself killed that night over two weeks ago?

They also soon had a video of the interview that had taken place downtown when Alex Richards went to the central police station with a plea for help in finding his girlfriend...

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“What brought your girlfriend to the Bristol area for a holiday, Mr. Richards?” the senior detective sergeant asked, looking bored. Every plod knew misspers cases in the area were as common as sea gulls.

The video images didn’t do Alex Richards justice. He was dressed in a sleeveless muscle shirt and faded jeans. His rugged face was framed by gelled hair in disarray, gaunt cheeks, and a Van Dyke goatee. Tats could be seen on both arms. He looked like a bad-arsed thug to Steve and the others, but his voice was a deep soft and silky bass.

“My band had some downtime. Abbie suggested a get-away, just the two of us. We were going to have a heavy gig in Manchester—it can get sketchy there sometimes in football season, especially after the games—and we were knackered, to be honest. We rented the caravan to just

vege a bit, smoke a bit of pot and get drunk—you know, to recuperate, like. Then she decided to visit Bristol on her own.”

The senior detective glanced at her companion, who shrugged. There were a few laughs around Steve. *The younger ones in the team aren't surprised by that; neither is the younger detective in the video.*

“Tell us what happened on the night that your girlfriend disappeared, Mr. Richards.”

“Abbie was out with some mates when she called. They said she got in her head that she was tired of what they were drinking. She likes that Irish stuff. You know: Jameson’s, Bushmill’s, Paddy’s. She grew up in Dublin, mate. Voice like a hoarse lark, she has, a la Janis Joplin. Had?” He made a sad face. “So, I guess there’s a 24/7 store about a mile away. She had no motor and usually doesn’t want to spend her dosh on a cab, so I assume she walked. She never returned. I called it in the next morning after chatting with her mates.”

“Mr. Richards, I want to ask you a question that you need to answer honestly: Was your relationship with Abbie cooling down?”

Alex made a face. “Maybe. I guess. Hell, I don’t know. She thought the little holiday would heat things up again, I suppose. I find the country boring, though. I need city life. That’s why she took off alone, I suppose.”

“Yet you’ve chosen Liverpool over London?” said the junior detective.

Alex shrugged. “We had some gigs in the Big Smoke, but that’s too much city. Just call me Goldilocks, mate. I guess Bristol would have been okay too, especially for her with all her mates here.”

“So, it’s possible that Abbie left Liverpool in a huff?” the senior detective said, trying to get the interview back on course.

“She could be a moody bitch sometimes. I’d have to be a bit dominant then. Couldn’t afford to lose her, mate, ‘cause she’s great at running things and could step in when our lead woman was out of sorts.”

“How was she out of sorts?”

“Period. Bad drugs or an overdose of good ones. Hangover from the drink. Anything like that. To be honest, I’d have made Abbie the lead if she weren’t such a moody bitch.”

The interview went on and on, going everywhere and getting nowhere, so Steve assigned a few people to follow up on what downtown had done.

“One, we need to see if downtown made a visit to that store,” Steve said. “In general, how much did they do on the case? The detectives’ expressions seemed to imply they think that Abbie just kept going because she was done with Alex, not uncommon for a mispers. Two, I want to know more about Alex Richards. It’s possible he’s lying, at least partially.”

“And maybe he’s the one who killed Abbie,” Owen said. “I wonder what she saw in him.”

“Some women like flashy bad boys, Owen,” Betsy said.

“And vice versa,” Owen countered.

“Okay, no more amateur psychological analyses,” Steve said. “Callum got us started on a good thread.” Steve nodded at the IT lad who’d also attended their meeting. “We need to see where that takes us as we continue unraveling it.”

## Chapter Nine

### The DCI Offers Some Help

Steve hadn't been in his office for more than five minutes when Mark Hunter appeared in the doorway. He curled a finger. “My office, Steve. I believe I've found you some help.”

When Steve entered Mark's office next door, he immediately recognized the senior officer from the video. She stood and offered to shake hands. For a woman, her grip was good.

“Detective Sergeant Alice Jepson,” she said.

“Detective Inspector Steve Morgan,” he said. “We just finished watching the video of your initial interview of Alex Richards.”

“Initial and only,” she said. “He got so pissed with us that he gave up. Said he was going back to Liverpool after hiring a PI, some bloke named Carl Hughes.”

Steve was frowning as he took his seat in front of Mark's desk alongside Alice. “Did he go through with that?”

She shrugged. “We did what we could. Your people found her. End of story...maybe.”

“Not for me. Someone killed her. It was no accident.”

“Probably another drugged and drunk groupie. Young girls today are often nothing more than kerb-crawlers who flash it around and do it for free to get a fix.”

Steve glanced at Mark, who frowned but said nothing. “So why are you here, Sergeant?”

She shrugged again. “Orders from my DI, mostly.” She glanced at Mark too. “And your DCI. I told my DI it's a cold case—all filed away, good and proper. He weighs your DCI's opinion more than mine.”

“Welcome aboard then,” Steve said, ignoring the double criticism. “I'm assigning you everything involving background for this case. I want to know all there is to know about Abbie, Alex, and Alex's band members. No stones left unturned.”

“I suppose you think justice will be served by finding her killer. Maybe you're right, but I think you're wrong. I'd bet on it even, but I'm not a betting woman.” She now stared at Mark. “I need a desk and computer. CID area?”

He nodded. He was frowning as she left.

“I'm not sure her secondment here will be any help,” Steve said to Mark. “She's a tough one, made so by years of experience, I suppose, and obviously doesn't approve of Abbie's lifestyle, maybe even believing she got what she deserved. You know none of that shouldn't matter.”

“I did what I could. I'm now thinking she can't help downtown much either, so that's why they offered her to me in secondment when I whined to the Super. Sorry about that.”

“Where's that chip on her shoulder come from? Some relative maimed or killed in a barney with a rock star maybe?”

Mark smiled. “I'm guessing it's more like anti-Irish sentiment. Her older brother was a soldier who was killed in Belfast during the Troubles. I suppose you saw in the video that Abbie was going out to buy Irish whiskey. Her parents were Irish immigrants, and she still has relatives in Cork.”

“That's the Irish Republic, not Northern Ireland. Her brother wouldn't have been fighting the IRA in Cork.”

“You and I both know the Troubles weren't really about religion, but many Irish Catholics and Protestants use religion to choose sides.”

"And anti-English sentiments, whether Catholic or Protestant, could have killed her brother. This world can get messy, Mark."

"Tell me about it. I have Jews among my kin."

Steve just nodded. He was wondering if Kanzi had any religious preferences. He certainly didn't. *We've never discussed that! Will our wedding contain rites corresponding to some strange religion practiced in Kenya? Or multiple ones?*

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Steve decided by the late afternoon briefing to rectify his error before most people went home to their families: Although Alice Jepson had already introduced herself to anyone she could in the CID, he wanted everyone to know officially who she was.

He then took care of other pressing business, which meant reviewing what had been accomplished so far. Betsy and a DC were on their way to Liverpool. He hadn't had to recuse her from the case because she'd asked Carl whether he'd accepted Alex's offer of a PI job; the answer had been no because Carl had already been over-committed. The question would now be: Had Alex asked anyone else to be his PI, and, if so, what had they discovered? Steve put that on Jepson's plate as well, but only because she was more familiar with most of the local PIs. Of course, Alex could have hired a PI from Liverpool or elsewhere.

It turned out that the downtown coppers hadn't followed up with a visit to the liquor store Abbie had visited. Steve asked Owen to visit the store. Because the woman had walked there, it might be useful to know if she'd ever made it. The store's security cameras might show something...or nothing. Or there might be some bottles at the bottom of the pond. Otherwise, the store would become irrelevant.

There were many other details to work on for the case. By the time he got everything organized to his satisfaction, it was late. He called Kanzi.

"Shall I pick up something to eat?"

"Already did, already ate. Some of yours too, the rest in the fridge. I'm eating for three, remember. Peckish most of the time, if I'm honest, made worse by tossing it up sometimes. I'll get even with you in some way."

He laughed because she'd offered that threat in a good-natured manner. "And you always have a good appetite anyway. Okay, I'll be home in a bit."

As he walked through the open-plan area, he saw Alice Jepson at her new desk. He went over to her. "How's it going?"

"Basically, trying to move on from where my old team stopped, Guv."

He appreciated the words "old team." *Is she settling in?* "Steve. Just Steve. We're only formal here if there are journalists or public around." He smiled. "We're all in this together."

"It all depresses me at times."

"I can understand that." Steve didn't exactly know what she was referring to, though. *There's a lot to depress coppers now!* "We can only do our best with the personnel and funding we have. Thanks for stepping in and helping out."

"No problem. I'll get to know everyone soon enough. A different experience to add to my resume."

"I'll admit secondments are a bit weird. A while ago, I had a real challenge with an MI5 secondment, so I know how they can be a bit of a drag."

Her eyebrows had shot up. "Playtime with the spooks? That indeed is a real challenge!"

He shrugged. "When I first got here, in fact. In the middle of my first case. Our DCI at the time took that over to avoid the MI5. Like you said: A different experience to add to my

resume." He pointed to her computer screen. "Don't work too late. Especially on computer files. They'll be there tomorrow."

"Just reviewing what we know about Alex Richards. I'd like to be able to eliminate him as a suspect, but he's a bit wanky."

"I've seen wankier. Have a good evening, Alice."

Steve headed for the stairs, aware that her eyes followed his every step.

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## Chapter Ten

### At Abbie and Alex's Caravan

Betsy and DC Tim Robertson had entered Abbie Turner and Alex Richards's small caravan, both a bit wary about the visit. Tim wasn't a big man, especially compared to Alex, and the rocker, with his wild hair and body art, was imposing. He also seemed sad as he gestured for them to take seats on a worn couch that struggled to fit two people. He sat on a wooden stool that was out of balance.

"I don't really want to talk about Abbie," he said before Betsy could even initiate the interview. "You plods in Bristol did nothing. I've gotten past that."

She nodded. "I understand your feelings. But having found her, the case is open again. Unfortunately, that often occurs. We don't have the budgets or personnel to be very proactive, Alex. And mispers are far too common."

"Lots of blather, big words used to describe doing nothing, Sergeant. I went to college. I concluded long ago that incompetents often use fancy twaddle to cover up that incompetence. Have you heard of Peter's Principle?" Both Betsy and Tim nodded after glancing at each other. "It's alive and well in all the so-called great democracies. It's even worse in fascist countries. Half of Europe is essentially fascist now, although they're still calling the countries that are, democracies. Words have no meaning anymore, and we have no Orwell to point out the absurdities of language."

"Do you want to help us find Abbie's murderer or not?"

"Murderers, and I already know who they are."

"You do?" Tim said. "Please tell us then. That's what we came for."

"You, me, anyone who once believed or still believes in the system. Life sucks, and then you die! End of story. It just happened to Abbie sooner than later." He put his face in his hands.

"Do you remember your lyrics for 'Goin' Down that Glory Road'?"

He looked at her, a thin smile for a moment chasing the sadness away. "'Don't think it's a setting sun when the day's just begun... you and me just being free.' Different times, Sergeant."

"Yes, but wouldn't you feel better knowing her killer was locked up for life? Or killers?"

"I'd rather see him hang, to be honest. Or her or all of them hang, as the case might be. How can a trip to a 24/7 liquor store be dangerous?"

She wanted to say, "Because you weren't there to drive her," but didn't. "There's danger all around us. Most people are lucky and aren't its victims. Some aren't so lucky, and we can reduce the chances for that by nicking the yobs who commit the crimes. Please help us, Mr. Richards. Did Abbie have any enemies?"

"I already told those plods in downtown Bristol everything I could, one in particular, a DS Jepson."

"She's on a secondment with us now. Were you referring only to people Abbie met while you were on holiday?"

"That sergeant implied that. Those plods were thinking her killer must be from the Bristol area. That's a bit myopic." He smiled. "To use a big word."

Tim was following Betsy's questioning and taking notes. "You were only a short time in our area," he said. "What about here in Liverpool? Any enemies here?"

"Um, just the usual punters who thought my Abbie was hot to trot. She wasn't. I strayed a lot more than she did." He laughed. "The make-up sex was always good!"

Betsy thought Alex was a cad for making that remark but continued. “So, if a punter was rejected by Abbie, would he get angry?”

“They wouldn’t be too pleased about it—deflates any bloke’s ego, to be honest—but they were usually so blootered that they’d never remember. If they returned to continue the hassle, we’d often be on to the next gig. Mostly in the Liverpool area recently, but we’ve even had gigs in Europe. Even with Brexit, English bands can have success over there.”

“In other words, you could make a list of punters she rejected? And her mates in the Bristol area?”

“Um, interesting request. For the punters, I might not remember complete names—I’m drinking while I’m playing, Sergeant—but I can usually give you a first name and tell you something I remember about their physique. Her list of mates is easier.”

*Physique?* thought Betsy. She’d have to study Alex’s history a bit more. He did sound more educated than your average band leader, but look at *Queen*. “That would be brilliant, Alex, especially if you could add a few words about time, place, and what was said by the punter.”

He tapped his head. “Easy ‘nough to do, if I can remember. She told me everything. That’s why I’d really feel guilty when I strayed. It’s the nightlife, Sergeant. Hens come onto us, especially me as the band leader.” He sighed. “It’s too late now for me to come clean. I loved that Irish wench. I really did.”

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After the plods left, Richards poured out half a cold lager and reminisced. One might say that Liverpool, the “city of the Beatles” with its famous Abbey Road, might be a logical place to start a rock band. That would be wrong. Nightlife in London offered many more opportunities for a band to take off. In fact, Alex had got the idea while having a pint with schoolmates one evening. Some of those mates often met in jam sessions in a garage that a neighbor loaned to them, the neighbor’s crazy son often pounding the drums while shirtless because he sweated so much.

Early on, membership in that band was fluid, and it didn’t even have a name. “Come and make a joyful noise!” seemed to be the only guiding rule, and they’d often have too many guitars, an extra drummer, or too few soloists. Abbie had been one of the latter, meeting Alex after his relocation to Liverpool, and belting out off-tune and raunchy oldies as well as new numbers in her raspy alto voice. They then discovered she had managing and accounting skills as well. She became the band’s agent by the time she and Alex became lovers.

They reveled in that exciting life, the night gigs filled with amped-up heavy-metal music, drugs and liquor, and sex...and eventually love. And then Uncle Sean arrived to ruin it all.

Abbie had told Alex about the gang’s origins—her origins, to put a fine point on it—about the Troubles and the gang’s violent history. Sean was the family’s black sheep. She’d wanted to avoid all that; so did her parents. The Troubles were now ancient history. What the gang had become, Abbie had said, could only lead to to different troubles with the police.

The two had agreed that the band would never help Sean’s gang. And then Abbie had disappeared!

## Chapter Eleven

### The Return from Liverpool

During the return trip to Bristol, Betsy O'Toole did some reminiscing of her own. The night before, she'd looked at the plate Carl Hughes had put before her. "You're going to make me fat, Luv."

"Chicken parm, hearty Italian bread, and penne a la vodka will help keep the best detective sergeant in the Avon and Somerset Constabulary healthy and strong." He refilled her glass. "I don't know about the wine. We'll interrogate Bacchus about that."

She laughed. Each day she loved the man more. "Might there be some Italians in your family's past history?"

"Not unless they were slave owners."

"Columbus was Italian."

"That he was. All the NYC Italians parade around town on his day. You see, love, when I'm not here, neither one of us eats well. Better said, we eat what's not good for us." He sat down with his own plate. "How was your day?"

"New murder case. I can't talk about it too much. Can't say that I want to either."

"Bad?" She nodded. "You never get used to it. Crazy people, evil people, doing all sorts of shitty things to other people. Rarely makes any sense. Not really."

"How was your day? Any new business?"

"Old business. I became a psychiatrist again for your professor friend."

"You might be the only man she trusts now."

Carl had recently finished a local case where a Bristol university professor Betsy had met as a consultant on an even earlier case acquired a violent stalker. Carl had caught the professor's tormenter.

"I think she wants my body."

Betsy laughed again. "She can't have it. You're mine. And what she really needs is a real psychiatrist. She can't have a life if she continues to only go to her classes and return. Her life is really in those archaeological digs. That's who she is."

"The stalker left her freaked out. Do you happen to know a psychiatrist who could help her? I have no idea how to even go about finding one here in the UK."

"I'll ask around. The important thing is that she needs to want help." She held up her fork with a thin piece of chicken parm on it. "Did you speak to her before pounding the chicken?"

He frowned. "Yeah, I imagined I was pounding her stalker."

"Maybe you need some mental help too."

"Oh, I'll be okay. And isn't it better to take it out on the chicken?"

"Um, I'll keep that in mind when we find the person who murdered our new victim."

As usual, their chinwag about work went on to more pleasant topics. After a movie and a late romp, they both slept well.

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Betsy and Tim told Steve about Alex's forthcoming list the morning after they returned. At the end of the day, he sent both lists as email attachments to the entire team. Betsy, Tim, Owen, Alice, and Steve met in a conference room to study their copies and comment on the names and descriptions.



"We should have done this," Alice said. "But good Lord, except for Abbie's Bristol mates, the names are from all over the UK, even Europe. How can we begin to question all these prats?"

"We prioritize by what Alex remembers about the encounters," Steve said, "starting with nearby communities and working outwards. At least that's one orderly way to do it."

"It will take forever," Owen said.

Steve nodded. "Some of these arses might also be in jail by now, so, depending on when they became a guest of the king, we can give them a low priority too."

"When did Abbie and Alex get together?" Tim said.

"If you're suggesting that as a filter," Betsy said, "anyone before that won't be on Alex's list. Maybe someone should go back in her history before that?" That question was for Steve.

"Abbie's parents are deceased," Alice said. "They last lived in Glasgow like your family did. A lot of sketchy characters around there; in Liverpool and Manchester too. We thought it might be a case that either Abbie or Alex ran up a debt to a drugs dealer that they couldn't pay."

Tim, who'd once worked downtown as a PC, said, "Unlikely in that case that we'd have found her body here on our patch."

"We wouldn't have anyway if the ploy of weighting her down had worked as intended," Owen said. "I'll volunteer to look into the drugs angle. I have a snout who sometimes is looking for money to finance a fix."

"So, you encourage his habit?" Alice said.

"No. I tell him to go get a good meal with the dosh. He generally doesn't, of course."

"Okay." Steve glanced at his watch. "In five, I have to give Mark a briefing. I don't have much to tell him, so wish me luck. And keep at it"

"We have Alex's lists."

Steve nodded. "There's that. Owen, what did you learn at the store?"

He smiled at Alice. "Abbie never made it there."

"So, she was taken somewhere between the cottage and the store," Alice said, ignoring the implied criticism of Alice and her old team. "That helps. I'll look at the ANPR records again. We might have missed something."

"The kidnapper's plates might be fake," Tim said.

"Or, taken off some vehicle that was in an accident and towed to a junkyard," Owen said.

"That would imply planning and not just the bad luck of her being at the wrong place at the wrong time," Alice said.

"More reasons to check the ANPR records," Steve said. "I can't remember if you downtown folks looked at them."

"Only over a certain period of time," Alice said. "Wasn't long enough to include the estimated TOD received from the PM, which we obviously didn't know at the time."

Steve nodded. Having a body and an identity had allowed a new beginning for the case.

## Chapter Twelve

### A New Demand and Alice's Confession

"Have you reconsidered our offer yet?" said the voice on the phone.

Alex Richards didn't need a name—he knew who the voice belonged to. "My answer's still the same, damn it. In fact, why shouldn't I tell the plods about you?"

"That would add another mistake to our list of grievances. There could be more consequences you'd surely consider prejudicial. Don't you have a sister and brother, Alex?"

"Estranged half-sister and half-brother," Alex said. "And your threats don't carry any weight now, Sean. Go back to Belfast and crawl into your ogre's den."

"And what should I tell my colleagues there? You're truly a victim of your own success. You really don't have a choice, lad."

"What your gang did to Abbie only hardens my position, you moron!" Alex ended the call.

He knew he might be killed as well: A contract could go out that very night! Tomorrow, at the latest. His killer might even be a member of his own band if the price on his head was high enough and a supply of free drugs was in the offer. *What am I going to do?*

He stared at his mobile for a moment as he pondered his options. His decision didn't take long: He had to do what was right for Abbie. He was a better man than Sean was.

He punched the numbers into the device.

"DC Alice Jepson speaking. How can I help you?"

"Hello, Alice. Sean just called me. I'm ready to come in."

He heard the heavy sigh. "I understand. It will probably mean the end of my career. But after what they did to Abbie, it's the right thing to do. I'll help all I can."

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"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Steve said to Alice. "Why didn't you tell your colleagues downtown about Alex's problem?"

She shrugged. "I thought he could work it out. I've known him for donkey's years. He's a smart lad. But then they killed Abbie when he refused to help them."

"And you're a dumb copper for not coming forward! You'll go down for obstructing justice at least, maybe even as an accessory to murder."

She glared at him. "Neither Alex nor I thought Sean would go through with it. Dysfunction in a family is one thing; murder is way beyond that."

"This Sean has made a huge mistake. When Abbie disappeared, you two should have realized what had happened. Who ordered the murder?"

"We have no idea. I can't believe it was Sean. He's more like a handler in a spy op, essentially a nobody who wouldn't dare make those kinds of decisions on his own. I'm sure it's part of a big operation where a lot of drugs are transported and sold. Actors and musicians are always on tour."

"And often drug users as well, at least occasional ones. I can't see them doing anything more than take orders, though. Someone else must fill the orders and deliver them, right?"

She shrugged again. "I'm just on the outside, Steve, looking in. An ignorant observer for the most part."

"Who else knows what you know?"

"Just me. And Alex, of course. He and Abbie, poor thing, were against the whole idea, even though Sean's her uncle."

"And your ex. Quite a family, I dare say." He stood. "It's time we two go have a little talk with Mark Hunter."

She nodded, but her facial expression showed that she was far from enthusiastic about the idea. *She must know her career is over.*

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"You were heading downtown's efforts, right?" Mark asked Alice. She nodded. "To think I was enthusiastic about your offer to join our effort to find Abbie Turner's killer. Were you obstructing those efforts?"

"No. I'm as keen on finding her killer as your people are because I'm sure Sean didn't do it. He's a weasel but not a killer. Things just got out of control. Alex's been threatened now. We need to bring him in and give him some protection."

"And nick Sean and put him in jail. Do you think he'll grass on the gang? That could help his cause. Does he even know who topped Abbie?"

"If he remains quiet, he'll live in jail for the rest of his life. If he grasses, he'll die. What would you do?"

"Erm, I see you still have feelings for him," Steve said. He turned to Mark. "I wouldn't trust Alice's input if I were you."

"I'm not a bent copper," Alice said, glaring at Steve. "I'm just trying to protect a fucked-up family."

"Complicit in the murder of a family member sounds bent to me," Mark said, although he seemed to say it without conviction. "Let's bring in both Alex Richards and Sean O'Reilly, the first to protect him, the latter if we can, and then attempt to get more information in interrogation. I'll then decide if we need to get NCA involved." He saw Steve's frown. "They deal with organized crime in the UK, Steve, and this seems about as organized as it gets. There's no telling how many people the gang's killed just from the drugs line alone." He studied Alice for a moment. "I want your warrant card, Detective Sergeant Jepson. Consider yourself relieved of duty until further notice and under house arrest. Don't make me lock you up, Alice."

"No sir." She nodded to both men. "I'll be at home if you need me."

After she'd left, Mark said to Steve, "Full out on this, Inspector. Forget all your other cases for the time being. Get some AROs involved if needs be." He shook his head sadly. "What a cockup! But you know something? I'm going to be wondering what I'd have done in her situation."

"I never thought I'd say it, but for once I'm happy I don't have any family left." Steve then thought of Kanzi and all her family and the two babies on the way who would make Kanzi and him into a family as well.

## Chapter Thirteen

### The NCA Is Ready to Play

Steve kept the rest of the investigation going even as they brought in Alex Richards and searched for the elusive Sean O’Reilly, Abbie Turner’s uncle. They still didn’t know who’d killed Abbie, and that was the focus of their investigation.

“Alex Richards is waiting in IR2,” Betsy told Steve a bit later from his office door.

Steve nodded. “Mark and I will interview Alex; you and Owen can watch behind the one-way window.”

“Will he be charged?”

“TBD. Not now, maybe later. Mark is mainly focused on whether we should ask NCA to join in on all the fun.”

“Because we haven’t found Sean yet?”

“That could be a factor. Go find Owen. Mark and I will meet you at IR2.”

“Do you have any experience with NCA?” Mark asked as Steve and the DCI walked towards the interrogation room.

“Gretchen Williams tried to recruit me once,” Steve said.

“You’re kidding!”

“I kid you not. She’s an old bird who knows what she wants. In my case, she didn’t get it.”

Mark nodded. “That I know her to be. She’s also a widow who fancies Jeremy Brand, the MI5’s counterterrorism director. Not officially, just gossip. Now there’s a match made in hell.”

Steve smiled. “Or heaven, if the complimentary aspects of their working lives carry over into their private ones, and vice versa. They’re older than Kanzi and I. Maturity must be good for something in our business.”

Mark laughed. “Wrinklies nowadays can have a lot of fun together.”

They entered the interrogation room after sending Betsy and Owen into the smaller adjacent one. The two detectives shook Alex Richards’s hand.

“Thanks for coming in, Alex,” Mark said, gesturing for them all to take seats. Steve then set up the recording equipment after obtaining permission from their visitor.

“I’m the one who should thank you for providing me with a bodyguard. I doubt that Sean and friends will try anything now, though, but you never know.” He frowned. “I said something similar to Abbie. His own flesh and blood! Imagine!”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Mark said, “but you don’t have any proof that Sean actually murdered her, do you?”

“I bet he knew that she was a target, though. He’s in a worse place than I am. The gang wants to punish me for not going along with their plan. Sean has to be in deeper trouble for promising he would get my band to cooperate.”

“What can you tell us about this gang?”

“Not much, if I’m honest. I can pop off a few names besides Sean, together with descriptions, but that’s about it. My world’s sketchy at the best of times—sex and drugs and all that—but I believe these blokes run a UK-wide operation.”

Steve glanced at Mark. *Is that enough to bring NCA onboard?* As if the DCI had read his DI’s mind, Mark nodded.

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NCA rented space in a downtown building not far from Bristol PD’s main HQ. Because that English city west of London was also a port—Shakespeare’s river, the Avon, flowed into it—that NCA office was a bit larger than those found inland, with the exception of London’s, of course. The agency had been created in 2013 as part of a major policing reform in the UK and had always focused on fighting organized crime.

As head of the agency’s drugs interdiction efforts, Gretchen Williams wasn’t at all like the expected political appointee. Instead, she was the exception to that rule because, like many NCA agents, she’d also been recruited from local police departments, as a DCI from Scotland Yard, in her case. Bristol PD had also gotten Steve Morgan from Scotland Yard in a parallel transfer, but that hadn’t stopped Gretchen from trying to recruit him later after he’d had a few well-publicized successes. She’d liked his energy, intelligence, and skills. MI5, MI6, and NCA had an erratic history of success when stealing agents in that manner, though: Sometimes the new hires did well, other times, not so much.

She’d gotten some inside information about MI5’s problems via her relationship with MI5’s counterterrorism director Jeremy Brand. That relationship was so solid now that she expected the old bloke to propose any day. It also meant that she missed him a lot when she had to travel outside London.

The trip to Bristol was absolutely necessary, though—at least at first blush. West coast policing needed help in going after an old but recently discovered and possibly nationwide drugs operation. The Home Secretary fully expected that the gang’s activities that Morgan’s team had exposed went far beyond the few revealed facts because that would explain a lot of other separate cases around the UK being studied by Gretchen’s agents.

After much too long a chinwag with NCA’s Bristol office director Keith Caldwell, the two made their way to a large conference room. They were the last to arrive. Both Mark Hunter and Steve Morgan nodded at her when she entered the room. They knew Keith only by name. After introductions and a short welcome from Keith, Gretchen took over the meeting.

Steve winked at Mark, who smiled back. They were both enjoying Keith’s displeasure about that takeover.

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Meeting with NCA

"Thanks to DCI Hunter and DI Morgan and other colleagues north of here, we think we might have the chance to close down a major drugs operation in this area if not nationwide. We're certain of its existence; details are scarce but point in the worst direction. These people are gangsters who are focused, intelligent, and often very violent. I'll let DCI Hunter tell you what we know about them so far so everyone can see why we're meeting here today."

Steve winked again at Mark as he stood to talk. The DI was perfectly happy to let the new DCI do the talking. Speaking in a general meeting was challenging enough; speaking in a press conference was even worse. Mark did both well. Neither of his DIs did, especially when it came to media rats.

"We pulled the murder victim Abigail Turner aka Abbie out of a pond in our area not long ago," Mark began. "She'd been tossed into it about two weeks earlier." He continued the tale about how that discovery had led to Alex Richards, Alex's band, and Uncle Sean's pressure on Alex's band to aid in taking orders for drugs and distributing them. Alex had testified that was the gang's standard MO, according to Sean, and also involved actors and touring drama groups.

"So, in other words, the actors and musicians drum up the business, this gang fills the orders, and the actora and muscians deliver them?" one of the local NCA agents asked.

*Unnecessary repetition*, Steve thought.

"That's what we think occurs, yes," Gretchen answered for Mark.

*She knows that will give more weight to the answer*, thought Steve. But Keith Caldwell couldn't let that pass without butting in.

"They probably have to focus on the larger urban areas," he said.

"Or they might connect with local dealers," Mark said. "Think of Sean O'Reilly's organization as the wholesale end of the operation. By taking them down, we'll lop of the head of the beast."

"And another gang will soon take its place," said the NCA agent from Manchester, always a center for drugs activity. "I suppose every little bit helps."

"Indeed," Gretchen said. "It's a never-ending battle with these wankers now." The word from the prim and proper Gretchen caused a few laughs. "Especially at the ports."

"I see in the briefing notes that this gang originated in Ireland. I assume you mean Northern Ireland?" That question came from the same local NCA agent.

Gretchen and Keith both nodded. *Actually, we only know Uncle Sean's from there as well as Abbie's parents*, thought Steve. He decided to let it go.

"Shouldn't we have some of their people here at this meeting then?" the local agent continued.

"Is there any indication that the gang's leadership still works from there?" Gretchen said to Mark and Steve.

"Not from our interrogations of Alex Richards and Alice Jepson," Mark said. He had to explain who Alice was. "We're still looking for Sean, her ex. Questioning him could clear up a lot of things."

"So, we're holding this meeting based on hearsay information provided by two people who aren't even in the gang?" Keith said. "In Alex Richards's case, someone who might have an axe to grind because his girlfriend was murdered? Seems like we might be wasting our time."

Gretchen glared at her rebellious colleague, anger in her eyes. *I don't blame her*, Steve thought. *Maybe advancement in the NCA requires going after your boss?* Silence reigned as everyone waited for her answer.

"You don't know either Mark or Steve well, Keith," she said quietly. "I trust them both without reservation and share their gut feeling that yes, Richards has an axe to grind, but he's come forward and provided us with valuable information. No one forced him to do that."

Steve smiled. *That's not strictly true*. That was one way to protect himself from Uncle Sean and his colleagues.

"And I say that, until you find this Sean O'Reilly, this case is going nowhere." He stood, hands flat on the table, and looked around the room at all the participants. "Now, I must leave. I have more pressing business to attend to compared to chasing ephemeral ghosts."

Keith left the room. Others also bid adieu, a few in support of Keith, but most almost apologetic to Gretchen.

The room became quiet. "He's right," she finally said to the remaining two officers. "For now, let's continue to hunt for Sean O'Reilly. We'll reconvene this working group after he's been questioned."

"Your Keith has a burr up his arse," Mark told Gretchen.

She nodded. "He can be difficult."

"I hate to say it, ma'am," Steve said, "and it's only an opinion, but he's a typical misogynist who can't stand women in power."

Gretchen smiled. "And you can be too candid sometimes, DI Morgan, yet I can only agree with you. Not officially, of course. And you're surely not unfamiliar with that problem. It's not unique to NCA."

"Of course not. But the stakes are higher in the agencies, ma'am."

"Let's just focus on finding Sean O'Reilly, shall we?"

## Chapter Fifteen

### Sean Is Found

Everyone thought that Abbie Turner’s Uncle Sean could be anywhere on the west coast, even in Scotland, or he could be in Northern Ireland, most likely Belfast. That made the search harder to coordinate, but it also let the Bristol substation and others take care of other business as well. One of Clarisse Workman’s other cases happened to produce a lead.

“I’m interrogating an arms dealer,” the DI told Steve. “One of your team might want to listen in.”

His answer was only a raised eyebrow. He knew Clarisse wasn’t his most avid fan. His parallel transfer had been a replacement for a more senior DI, but Steve had also accumulated more seniority in London that counted more than hers in Bristol. He got the old DI’s office that was next to the DCI’s as well. That had been the old DCI’s decision, not Mark’s, and Steve hadn’t completely agreed with it. That seniority question had caused problems in his working relationship with Clarisse—nothing serious, but the tensions had taken time to dissipate.

“It’s simple,” she said. “I know your team is looking for someone named Sean O’Reilly. Our techies found an interesting client list on the arms dealer’s laptop, one of many; there’s a Sean O’Reilly on it.”

“Worth a listen then.”

As they walked towards IR1, Clarisse continued, “I know Sean O’Reilly’s a fairly common Irish name, so it might not be your bloke, but maybe you’ll get lucky. I’ll throw in some not-too-subtle questions about that list, as well as others, of course.”

“Your call. What kind of weapons does the bloke sell?”

“Mostly Chinese copies of western ones. Sound familiar?”

As part of their insidious geopolitical plans, China had launched several programs designed to destabilize traditional western democracies; one of them had been to arm domestic terrorists in the UK. Their substation had got involved in some of that mess, even with the domestic terrorists themselves.

“Their efforts are like weeds,” Steve said. “You get rid of a few. Others take their place. I don’t suppose this dealer is important enough to let MI5 handle the case?”

“This interrogation might help us decide that. I’ve got her for murder, so she might want to make a deal.”

“Her? She?”

“Denise Brockton. We think she took over her husband Lou’s business interests: brothels, drugs and human trafficking, smuggling, and so forth. I don’t think any of her gigs is big enough or expanding fast enough to worry big players like MI5 or NCA, if I’m honest, and I just want to solve my murder case.”

“Understood. Not enough on her to shut her whole operation down?”

Clarisse shrugged. “Probably not, not completely, and she could just run everything from jail. It’s easier for a woman to do that than a man, I dare say.”

Steve paused as he reached for the knob to the door leading into the little room behind the one-way window that looked into IR1. “It’s unlikely she’ll grass on anyone in that list then. She’ll protect her people and her clients.”

“She might surprise us. The promise of a few good words about her to the CPS might loosen the old hen’s tongue. I’m going after her for more than Sean O’Reilly, and a threat for Denise of life in prison without parole for murder might do wonders.”



“I wish you success then.”

During the interrogation, Steve saw that Brockton was careful with her words. She grassed just enough and was choosy about what and whom she grassed about. She threw Sean O’Reilly under the bus, though.

“He’s a useless piece of human shite,” she told Clarisse. “Fraid of his own shadow, that plonker. Errand boy for an Irish gang, he is. Lock’im up for all I care.”

*We will, thought Steve. But after he talks to us!*

SAMPLE

## Chapter Sixteen

### Sean Is Captured

Steve thought it was overkill, but Mark sent Steve, Owen, two DCs, and three AROs to bring Sean O'Reilly in. The old man was no one's fool, though. As Denise Brockton had informed Clarisse and her sergeant, his bedsit was located in a squalid neighborhood where even unmarked police cars looked out of place. The two DCs drove two of them, Steve and Owen as passengers. Steve's car was following Owen's; he cursed when he saw that the car ahead of them had its whip antenna still up.

They'd just jumped out of the cars when an old Rover roared out of a car park next to Sean's building. Steve recognized him. "Let's go after him!" Steve ordered his driver.

They'd just started when Sean made a three-pointer and flew past all three police vehicles now going the other way.

"Follow him!"

They were now leading the police-car parade. While his driver piloted the speeding vehicle after his own three-point reversal, partly on two wheels, Steve managed to get on the radio, ordering the other two cars to set up a roadblock to trap Sean.

"We'll get this SOB!" the driver yelled.

It was a prescient statement: As their car went through a round-about with blues and twos clearing the way, an advantage Sean hadn't had, they followed him at the turnoff into the other end of that same narrow road they'd been on. That road solely existed to access the old high-rises, Sean's being one of those buildings. Steve soon spotted Sean's vehicle; he'd been blocked by the others.

Steve's driver reversed but not soon enough. Sean came from behind his stopped vehicle and aimed at them. The first bullet cracked the patrol car's windscreen; the second hit Steve's driver.

"Hold on, mate! When I say stop, do it!"

They continued in reverse, Steve steering the speeding car the best he could from the passenger's seat. "Stop!"

The driver braked just in time to avoid reentering the round-about. Steve could now see the Rover speeding towards them.

"He's going to try to push us into the round-about! Shift into first and go forward!"

Again, Steve awkwardly steered as the patrol car accelerated. The crash triggered all the airbags.

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Mark and Owen questioned Sean; Betsy and Steve watched from the little observation room. Three officers showed what damage airbags could do even as they saved one's life; Steve's driver was now in A&E for a gunshot wound as well. Fortunately, he would be okay.

Sean O'Reilly had been a victim of his airbags as well, but the heavy Rover had protected him better. He was pale and looked tired. His brief, however, looked like he was going off to some gala, his three-piece suit hardly wrinkled. He just looked bored.

Owen started the VCR, announced who was there in the room, and read the charges. The brief followed along using the charge sheet he'd been provided. He'd already used the allotted time to talk to his client.

Mark then took over the interrogation. "Do you understand the charges against you, Mr. O'Reilly?"

Sean shrugged. "Those bastards had air bags too. I knew I couldn't kill them plods, but I figured the others would be coming the other way...and I was right!" He sighed. "You can't charge me for attempted murder, though."

Mark hesitated for a moment. *He wasn't there*, Steve thought. *And what about my driver? Wasn't that attempted murder?* Owen had created the charge sheet. *Did Mark check it?*

Mark then glared at Sean. "What about your niece?"

"You rozzers got that wrong as well. I'd never kill Abbie. The bosses didn't listen to me."

"Let's discuss who "they" might be, Sean."

The solicitor, the dishonorable Harold Weed, Esquire, was well-known to old hands at the substation and around the Avon and Somerset Constabulary in general. Steve had warned Mark about him and some irascible reporters earlier during the DCI's welcome brief. *Will Mark remember?*

"My client won't be discussing any of that," Weed said.

Sean ignored the solicitor. "What's in it for me?" he said, glaring at Weed.

"We can discuss that too," Mark said.

"Not with this wanker spouting his arsey shite here. Get rid of him!"

"You'll be without legal representation," the brief objected.

"You represent them, you useless piece of human shite, not me. You're here to keep me from spilling my guts now to make them pay for killing Abbie. You're just as bad as they are. Get the hell out of my sight!"

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After Weed was escorted out, Mark said, "He's right, Sean. You're now without legal representation. Is that okay? I could call a duty solicitor for you."

"That'd be worse than Harry, I'd wager. I'm not new to interrogations, Detective Chief Inspector Hunter. I can say 'no comment' as well as the next wanker. But I'll feel better telling my story without that arse around. Actually, anyone who might leak things to the gang."

Mark nodded. Sean now looked more relaxed, and his color had returned, although he still looked tired. He wiped away some drops of blood that had leaked from a bandage on his left temple, took a sip of tea, made a face because it had cooled too fast, and then leaned back in his chair.

"To start, I don't know who actually killed my niece. I know who ordered it, though. It was an evil, useless, and stupid plan to scare Alex Richards into cooperating. Knowing that wanker like I do, because of Abbie, I thought it might make him even more stubborn, and it did."

"Have you been with the gang since it started up in Northern Ireland?" Mark said.

That detour seemed to throw Sean off track a bit, but he eventually nodded. "Hard days, them. British soldiers were hunting us, those Presbyterian wankers wanted to kill us too, and we were nearly starving because the Troubles had destroyed the economy. We started with a wee bit of smuggling, and it grew from there. Then Gary, one of our leaders, had the brilliant idea to use touring band members, stage actors, and such as sales reps. They can go almost anywhere in the UK without anyone paying them mind beyond their entertainment business. It's grown to be a monstrous enterprise. You blokes can't begin to imagine how much. Connections all over now."

Steve thought that might be a bit of braggadocio from an old man's equivalent of proudly pounding his chest. *But NCA might back him up?*

"We want to behead that monster, Sean. If you can help us do that, we'll present your case to the CPS with some good words about how much you've cooperated."

“You plods don’t realize how hard this is. Some of them wankers are friends from way back. But the organization has changed a lot, becoming more violent as they became greedier. It now has connections all over Europe and beyond. By monster, I’d mean something with multiple heads and tentacles.”

*Okay, maybe he’s not bragging,* Steve thought.

“You can only tell us what you know, but that will help a lot. And we’re focused on nicking your niece’s murderers. We’ll let others do the rest, considering how big the organization is.”

Sean smiled and nodded. “I’ll need some writing materials. And ‘cause you plods have my phones, you’ll have to match up names I give you to phone numbers and addresses using them.”

“We can do that. Any ideas about who killed your niece will be especially useful.”

“I’ll also need some kind of written promise about going easy on me at the CPS. I shot a few Unionists back in Belfast long ago, had a few barneys there too, but I’ve never kilt anyone, even though the gang has changed for the worse. You’ve gotta believe that.”

“We only deal with facts, Sean.”

In the brief team meeting after they’d left Sean making notes for them watched by a nonsense brawny PC, Steve noted that Mark was more upbeat than normal. It had been unusual for him to run the interrogation. *Did Mark run across this gang back on his old patch? If so, he hasn’t said anything about it.* Steve decided it wouldn’t matter.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Gang Members Worry

Frank Collins knew they were in trouble; in particular, he was in a lot of trouble if the bosses looked for someone to blame. It was mostly on him, after all: When Sean O'Reilly had balked at the idea to pressure Alex Richards by topping his bird, Sean's niece Abbie, they should have just eliminated Sean as well. The old Irishman had been pissed at them ever since. And now that the plods had Sean, he might grass on them.

They went way back, Frank and Sean. They were closer than most brothers are. Their early success came from doing things for the bosses, things they hadn't wanted to do themselves. Frank had resisted silencing Sean; Sean had resisted killing Abbie. They'd both erred in the eyes of the bosses.

Larry Sullivan, who was just a bit higher in the hierarchy than either Frank or Sean, met him at their favorite Liverpool pub. Frank could tell Larry wasn't happy. He wasted no time getting down to business.

"Your mate Sean could be singing like a canary now, thanks to Denise."

"He knows how to say 'no comment' as well as any of us," Frank said. "We've been doing it most of our lives. Even when British soldiers tortured us way back when."

"Yes, but now he's old and soft, and I don't trust him. Not at all. The others don't either. Don't we have a plod on the inside who can shut his yap for good?"

"Not in that Bristol substation where he's being held. It's relatively new. We had his Alice downtown, but she's confined to her flat under police guard now."

"How much does she know?"

"Not much, compared to Sean. He doesn't know much either, to be honest. Just names, phone numbers, maybe where people hang out. The two broke up a while ago. Besides, she isn't likely to do Sean for us."

"She or Denise could have told the plods where to find Sean." Larry thought a moment. "We have a few uniforms who've accepted bribes, right?"

Frank frowned at Larry. "Good luck getting them to shut Sean down for good. You and I would be wise to disappear for a while, especially if NCA gets involved."

"What have you heard?"

"Saw, via our spies. They had a meeting downtown. Gretchen Williams was there. They're planning something. She doesn't leave London on a whim."

"The others won't like that."

"Let them figure out how to shut Sean up then!"

Larry nodded. "They should make it a two-fer, in fact. Alice might know a lot more than you think, and she still has feelings for Sean. Wouldn't have jeopardized her career otherwise." Larry thought some more while Frank sipped his lager. "There's a bloke in Durham we've used many times before for clean-up. Scary bastard, if I'm honest, because he seems to enjoy and invent new ways of doing it. I'll suggest to the bosses that we use him again."

Frank sighed. "I don't want to know any details."

"No one will. Not even the bosses. It'll just be done."

## Chapter Eighteen

### The Attack

Alice Jepson heard the doorbell.

“I’ll get it,” The uniform on duty, PC George Chapman, said.

“Probably best,” she agreed, “but it’s most likely just a salesman. They’re like flies on turds around here.”

She hadn’t yet stopped being a copper, at least not in her use of rough language or for her skills at sensing danger. When she heard the brief scuffle and George’s grunt and then silence, old instincts kicked in.

There was only one escape route available to her. She grabbed her purse off the table, threw open the back window off the kitchen, and climbed out onto the fire escape. Tiptoeing down the rusty iron steps, she made it to the alleyway and disappeared into the night. The cloudy sky let just enough moonlight through to light her way to the avenue where she hailed a cab.

After arriving at her destination, she paid with a credit card, and entered the police station. She knew there’d be problems—she had no warrant card or any other ID—but the substation was the safest place for her to be at that time.

“You’ve got to help me,” she told the duty sergeant in the entrance hallway who was half asleep behind his tall desk. She couldn’t remember his name. *Doug something?*

He took his headphones off. *Does he recognize me?*

“How can I help, ma’am? ‘Tis off hours now, but I can make some calls. You in trouble?”

There was a bit of a leer in his smile. *He probably thinks I’m just an old kerb-crawler.* She was only dressed in an old tee, worn blue jeans, and sandals.

“My name is Alice Jepson. I’m a police detective. Is anyone from Steve Morgan’s team here?”

“If you’re a detective, show me your warrant card.”

“I don’t have it with me.”

“I see. Have a seat over there. I’ll see who I can find.”

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Morgan took the call from the duty sergeant, the two of them being among the few still at the substation on a Friday night. Steve had decided to make up some time he’d spent accompanying Kanzi to a prenatal check-up; the duty sergeant was just beginning the usual night shift he shared with another rozzar.

“There’s a woman here looking for some member of your team, Steve. She looks familiar. Says her name’s Alice Jepson, and she claims to be a detective.”

“I’ll be right down.”

*How and why is Alice here?* Steve thought as he took the stairs two at a time. He had a bad feeling about what the answer might be.

“What’s happened?” he said when he approached her sitting there in front of the duty sergeant’s high desk. She stood and then surprised him. She was trembling and hugged him in desperation.

“I—I think George—George Chapman, your PC—is dead, Steve. They sent someone to kill me!”

“Stay right here with Doug. I need to make some calls.”

He was back in twenty, shaking his head. “I was lucky. A patrol car was within two blocks of your buildings. George wasn’t so lucky, though. You were right. Poor bloke’s gone. Why are you a target?”

“Probably because they think Sean’s told me things about their gang? They’re covering their arses, Steve! Is Sean here?”

“Downstairs. Until next Thursday. It was as good a place to put him as any. On Thursday, we’ll take him to be arraigned. We’ve gotten everything we can from him.”

“They might think they’ll stop us from grassing, or they’re trying to punish us for doing it.”

“But Sean said you don’t know any details. So why you?”

“To cover all bases? They don’t know what he’s told me. Sean said they’re as paranoid as hell. What kind of protection does Sean have?”

“Just the usual custodial sergeant. Mark thought they wouldn’t dare attack our substation. Anyway, we’ll have more protection arriving. I called for an ARU.”

“How soon will they get here? We’d better get down to the cells and support that sergeant.”

“I’ll mind the fort here,” Doug, who’d been listening, said. “Just wait a second. I’ve got heat in my locker.”

Steve couldn’t help smiling at the old man’s use of the American cop shows’ slang. “Are there any weapons back there for us?”

“Most lockers are open. We don’t let many people behind that desk. I’ll check.”

“Then find some guns for us too if you can.”

“Now I remember. Isn’t this the woman who’s under house arrest?”

“I’m deputizing her on the spot, pardner.”

Doug smiled. “I’ll see what I can find.”

## Chapter Nineteen

### Battle at the Nick

Sean was surprised to see Alice when she entered the cell block with Steve. The old Irishman was even more surprised to see her carrying a gun along with the inspector, the rozzer he'd rammed at the roundabout.

"What's going on?"

"We might have a violent intruder arriving here soon," Steve said. "Or intruders. It's just Alice, me, Tony, and Doug for now. Where's Tony, by the way?"

"Loo, I think. Goes a lot, he does. Might have bladder problems, the old bastard." He grabbed the cell bars. "So, they've decided to cover their arses, have they? No surprise! So much for sticking together. Somebody should tell them they're too late. And Alice doesn't have anything to do with any of this mess."

"Sean has been cooperative," Steve explained to Alice.

"I'm glad he's taken responsibility for once," she said, glaring at her ex. "But too little, too late. Sean, you should have left that gang long ago. Now you're going to get us all killed!"

"Who is it? Who's coming after me?" Sean asked Steve.

Steve noted the lack of concern for Alice, Steve, and the two night sergeants. Sean worried about himself first. *Probably always did. Abbie maybe a rare exception?*

At that moment, Tony the custodial sergeant returned from the loo.

"Grab a gun if you have one, mate," Steve told him. "Doug and we are the only defenders of the station."

"You going to leave me in here?" Sean whined. "I'm a sitting duck."

"If they get by us, Sean," Alice said, "then you damn well deserve what you get. That poor PC at my place is dead. That's essentially on you!"

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The gang's hitman arrived at the same time as the ARU comprised of four fully armed AROs. Fortunately, he spotted them and hid behind the only other vehicle in the station's car park. One ARO went inside while the other three took defensive positions.

*Just my luck tonight*, he thought, following that assessment with a string of Georgie curses. First, that woman didn't open the door, only that bumbling lad. Then the woman escaped. *Did she come here to warn the other plods? They couldn't be that well prepared, could they?*

He hated to damage his record of successful kills. Each success had increased his reputation. His yearly earnings might now take a hit.

He studied the three AROs' appearances. Clearly, they'd been roused from their beds. While in the usual vests and helmets and armed to the teeth, military style, their clothes were wrinkled, some were in jeans and trainers, and they were all unshaven. *Not ready for a prim and proper military parade*, he thought with a smile.

He decided to hang around just in case they tried to hustle either one of his targets, Sean O'Reilly or the woman, off somewhere else, in which case he'd become a sniper. He'd had a lot of practice killing, including that mode. He always aimed for the head. There was too much of a chance that a target had a vest on. Even a high-powered round might not penetrate a newer one.

Too late he heard the crunch of some gravel. Steve Morgan, reliving his tours in Afghanistan a bit, didn't even say "Police!" as the hitman spun around. The plod shot him in the throat. The ARU leader's shot slammed into his forehead. The hitman's last thought was, "Oh well, you had a good run!"



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"You won't be questioning that bastard," the ARU leader said to Steve.

Morgan didn't know him, so he only nodded. He found his mobile. "I need to make some calls."

He was almost shaking. The threat had been different, but the hitman had brought back bad memories of when a terrorist had attacked him in that same car park. *Is our nick too exposed?* People often worked late, and the station would almost become deserted. Only the two sergeants, custodial and duty, would normally be there late at night and early in the morning. They or prisoners could be easily attacked. He'd have to remember to mention the problem to Mark.

"Tell one of my colleagues to join me out here," the ARU leader said. "We need to guard this body and see if we can ID him, correct?"

"Could be useful if he's not just another hitman for hire. Thank your team for the quick response. Our puny arms might not have been very effective against his firepower. Where do these scrotes get weapons like that?"

"Don't be naïve, Inspector. Grouse hunters can even buy those, legally or illegally, mostly the latter if anyone pays attention to legal uses. Not as bad here as that NRA crap in the US, but not much of a hindrance for those with enough money, I dare say. And the gangs always seem to have enough money. Our ARUs are often outgunned."

Steve sighed, seeing the man end his little anti-gun speech with a yawn. "And without sleep. I'll get you and your team homeward bound as soon as I can. Please thank them all."

## Chapter Twenty

### Hunter's Revenge

It took a while. Steve and the sergeants had the station locked down, with Sean still in his cell and Alice locked up in one as well, more for her protection there in the bowels of the station, with two AROs guarding them, but the inspector wasn't comfortable with the situation. Fortunately, his team started dribbling in, Mark Hunter the first to arrive.

He wanted to see the dead hitman who was still in the car park, stretched out as if his dead eyes were studying cloud formations as they gathered for a promised storm. Steve watched his boss stare at the scarred and unshaven face for a moment. *Recognition?* Steve thought. It seemed like Mark tried to hide it.

"Do you know him?"

"Hard to see in the dim light and with all the blood, but maybe. If he's who I think he is, his career as a hitman is over. Too bad we can't ask him who hired him."

"He probably wouldn't say. And it was a choice between killing him or being killed. I'm afraid my military training kicked in. I shot even before the ARO. He'd have chewed us up with that automatic weapon."

"Where'd you get your gun?"

"Doug. Some of the sergeants have them in their lockers. Peashooters in comparison to the hitman's."

"It only takes one well-aimed bullet. Did you call SOCOs and the pathologist?"

"They might take a while. It's late." Steve looked at his watch. "Or early, depending on how you view it."

"Are you two okay to stay on guard here," Mark asked the ARU leader. He nodded. "I'll have someone get some coffee and tea going inside. We'll bring you out some." He pointed skyward. "If it opens up, get in my motor." He tossed the ARU leader his keys. "You won't fit in Steve's."

As they returned to the station, Steve said to Mark, "Can you confirm your thoughts on ID? I need to get something going. We can't let them get away with killing our PC."

"DNA will do that easily enough but probably take too much time. I need a pic and a tech to do facial recog. If he's who I think he is, we once grilled him back at my old patch. To be a bit less circumspect, I think he's the one who killed my wife Judy years ago when he was just beginning his career with B&E. I'm guessing he preferred the assassination game."

"Good lord! That must feel good in a way."

"No, because I want to nick the bastards who ordered this hit as well. Like you said, we lost a good man. They need to pay. I'd rather that we'd do it too, but if we can only do it with the help of NCA, so be it. I need to talk to Gretchen."

"I don't suppose the hitman is a member of Sean's gang?"

"Not likely. He's probably just a killer for hire, so that the leaders of the gang can appear to have their hands clean."

## Chapter Twenty-One

### A Gang Leader Is Captured

By midmorning, they'd used Mark Hunter's idea: They matched the dead hitman's face to Edward Greene, whom Hunter's old nick had interrogated donkey's years ago as suspect in the case of a kerb-crawler's murder. Hunter had kept his suspicions to himself back then that a younger Eddie had started killing when he'd broken into the newlyweds' home. The latter had never even been discussed, but the kerb-crawler's murder was proven to be Eddie's work. Unfortunately, they'd had to release him when the forty-eight-hour limit was up, and Eddie had disappeared until now.

The DCI decided to get Sean's perspective. Morgan joined them in IR1 while Betsy and Owen watched the show via the one-way window.

Mark shoved the photo of Greene's death-mask over to the old man. “Do you know this bloke?”

Sean stared at the photo and then nodded. “And I'll celebrate along with you plods that Eddie Greene's dead. I always thought his last name should be changed, you know. The gang's used him to clean up their messes a lot, probably more often than I know. He likes to use a knife, by the way, so blood-red's more his color.”

Hunter frowned. *Probably thinking of his new bride Judy so long ago*, Morgan thought. The DCI now shoved a copy of Sean's list of names the old IRA member had provided. “Who in this list is most likely to have hired Eddie?”

“That would be Pat McGowan, Larry Sullivan, or Benny McCourt. They're who's left from the original leaders. Otherwise, I don't have any idea. That list is limited. Others have died or moved on, some have joined up—you know how it goes.”

“But from your gang? Or from affiliated gangs?”

“What I said, mate. They consider me old and useless, you know. I'm only in out of respect, I suppose. Anyway, those three bosses generally clean up their own messes. Others too, if I'm honest, but the others wouldn't dare go after our original gang members like me.”

“And this Eddie acts alone?”

“Mostly. Even when he started out as a lad doing B and E, he was a loner. He could be in the MI6 now, he's such a good assassin.”

*That could be a new twist on James Bond's “license to kill,”* Steve thought. “Any ideas about where he lived?”

“Anywhere in the UK. He did jobs overseas too—Berlin, Dublin, and Paris, if I'm not mistaken—but he prefers to work in the UK. So, I take back my MI6 comment. Maybe it's MI5.”

“Where's he from initially?” Hunter said.

“Parents long ago moved the family to a wee village near Sheffield. I can't remember the name.”

Steve saw Mark's frown. *I bet he knows it!* “Probably hasn't lived there recently. What about Pat, Larry, and Benny?”

“You're more likely to find them somewhere here on the west coast where they can easily hop on a ferry and escape to Ireland. They've got family over there. Can't see them getting a lot of help from them, though, especially if they know how that trio makes a living.”

Hunter decided to then end the meeting, to be continued later, and gestured for Steve and his two sergeants to accompany him to his office.

“I think it’s time to talk with Gretchen Williams,” he told them after they all found seats. “I want to nick those devils, at least the one that sent Eddie Greene after Alice and Sean. But we don’t have the personnel here to do a UK sweep, not even one of the west coast.”

“They’ll want to get more than those three,” Steve said.

Mark sighed. “I’ll have to convince her that at least one of those three will lead us to the others in the organization.”

“Is this personal, Mark?”

“Eddie’s death ends the personal part, Steve. But okay, yes, it’s personal in the sense that I want to shut down this criminal organization, even if it no longer has much to do with Bristol.”

SAMPLE

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Another Meeting with the NCA

Gretchen Williams entered the conference room followed by Keith Caldwell. She took her chair at the head of the table and nodded to those who’d been waiting, a group that included DCI Mark Hunter and DI Steve Morgan.

On their way downtown, Mark had told Steve that Gretchen had overruled Keith, who’d not wanted the meeting, insisting the Avon and Somerset plods still hadn’t provided enough evidence to move on Sean’s old gang and their affiliates.

Gretchen now ignored Keith’s withering glare and got down to business. “We’re here to organize a sweep on the west coast against this old Irish gang and their accomplices. This week we’re going to create a new list of criminals based on Sean O’Reilly’s original list and any additional names we’ve discovered in the interim. Come the weekend, we’re going to arrest all those we can. We’ll spend enough time in interrogations to pressure some with the most dirt on their hands to grass on others. We can’t kill the monster, but we can certainly wound it. We already have enough evidence to do that, so anything extra is frosting on the cake. Understood?”

Mark and Steve nodded along with most of the other participants, now a much larger group—they came from as far north as Glasgow and as far south as Plymouth—but, as Steve looked around the table, he saw that neither the Bristol area’s downtown plods nor local NCA agents were on board. *Backing Caldwell*, he presumed. *Screw them!*

Gretchen pushed a legal pad in front of her and then slapped the table. “I’m now speaking with the authority of the Home Secretary and the UK government! If you aren’t willing to contribute to this plan, please enter your name here and get out of my sight. I want one-hundred-percent cooperation!”

Steve smiled. Now the other Bristol area lads looked nervous. *What would Gretchen do with that list?* He saw Caldwell nod at his supporters. No one left their name on the pad and left the meeting. Steve still feared that Caldwell and company might do something to prejudice their sweep, though. Even just reluctantly going through the motions might do that. Gretchen must have sensed such thoughts still existed.

“Okay, by not signing and leaving, I’m assuming all here are one-hundred percent committed to our effort. Anyone who fails to give me that one-hundred percent will suffer the consequences. Now I’ll outline the bare bones of my plan. I want to hear opinions, constructive ones, ones that will put meat on those bones. We’re smarter than this gang. They’ve run wild far too long. The NCA and police reorg that occurred in 2013 was made precisely to go after such organizations. We’ve had some successes. Let’s make this a big one!”

As usual, the Devil would be in the details, but Mark and Steve left NCA’s Bristol HQ that evening quite pleased with the results.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### A Nationwide Op

The government, that is, Gretchen and her NCA colleagues, had made the operation so monolithic, although there were many smaller working parts, that Mark’s officers became only a small cog on a huge gear wheel. Even if they weren’t leading the effort, most local police forces involved knew where they’d likely find the gang’s principal leaders among organized crime in their areas. Up and down the coast, holding cells soon became full. Police in the Avon and Somerset Constabulary, including Mark and Steve’s group and what the rest of the world might call Bristol PD, knew better than most because of people like Sean O’Reilly who’d become snouts as well as minor criminals, grassing on more major criminals as a necessity to survive or improve their situation if they dared. Crowded cells became less so as some prisoners were released after interrogation because they were beyond suspicion of being one of the more important gang members the authorities wanted to capture in their nets.

One interrogation at their substation led directly to Pat McGowan. The drug dealer questioned had heard Pat talking on the phone to someone named Eddie about eliminating both Alice and Sean. That dealer said that this Eddie ended up agreeing to the contract for five thousand quid, a low price, especially considering that Pat had hired him several times earlier.

They left for the squalid neighborhood where Pat might be found, not far from the mosque near their station where domestic terrorists had attacked Islamic worshippers not too long ago. Steve was a bit dubious: The surprise factor would surely be gone by now. Pat and the other two scrotes surely already knew about the NCA’s sweep. They might now even be on ferries steaming towards Dublin or Cork or even the continent.

They went prepared, though. The detectives and uniformed officers only carried batons and wore vests, but two ARUs were again there to lead the way, as ready for battle as any platoon of Royal Marines and perhaps even a lot more motivated.

“I almost feel superfluous,” Steve whispered to Betsy O’Toole. “Not like in Afghanistan, I dare say.”

“Maybe you should have become an ARO,” was her whispered return that was accompanied by a smile.

“Only at moments like this one could that even possibly seem logical.”

*And still inappropriate for a future father*, he thought. Of course, Kanzi might not have been as interested in having a serious relationship with him then! A police officer’s job was always dangerous; an ARO’s, even more so. SOCOs were in the least danger, but both Kanzi and Steve had been attacked at one time.

Mark and Steve had agreed to divide their little assault force, Mark’s half in front and Steve’s in back of the little block of shops. Pat was supposedly in the flat over the fish-and-chips shop midway along the block. Both floors had looked dark from the front, and they looked the same from the back now.

At that early morning hour, most people, possibly even Pat McGowan, were asleep. Steve wished he was at home doing a lie-in with Kanzi as well—she hadn’t liked what was going down, of course—but he’d also wanted to take part in arresting and interrogating McGowan.

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After arriving at the back of the row of buildings, Morgan’s little group had seen the flat was accessed via narrow stairs to the second level. They knew there was another flight that rose from inside the fish-and-chips shop because records showed its previous owner used to live

above his business. The AROs would be going up both flights first to break down the corresponding doors.

Before Morgan's AROs were even halfway up, a man flung open the backdoor and began shooting an automatic rifle. The two AROs went down. Morgan glanced at their bloody and shattered legs. *What ammo is this arse using?*

Steve moved in to meet the thug as he jumped over the AROs and continued down the stairs. The thug pointed his weapon at Steve, but it jammed. The scrote tossed the now useless rifle at Steve and pulled out a knife.

"Give it up!" Steve said, brandishing his patrol officer's baton. That made the thug hesitate but only for a few seconds, "Or you'll not like the feel of this. And, even if you get past me, my colleagues will take you down. Lose the knife!"

Betsy and two DCs were now backing Steve up, their batons ready as well. But Steve was in a hurry. The AROs were writhing in pain, and there was a chance they'd bleed out if EMTs didn't get to them in time.

The thug yelled and lunged at Steve. His baton became a blur and smashed into the now exposed wrist; Steve then smacked the side of the head. The gang member crumpled to the ground.

"Get tourniquets on the AROs if needs be," Steve said to his sergeant. "The DCs and I are going in."

## Chapter Twenty-Four McGowan Surrenders

Steve and the two DCs, batons ready, went up the stairs and entered the flat. They stopped when they saw the face-off between Mark’s group and Pat McGowan. One of Mark’s two AROs was dead on the floor with a head wound—the gang had learned how to avoid the police vests by shooting for the head or legs, often deadly but still more difficult shots to make. Mark held the other ARO’s rifle on Pat, but the gang leader’s knife was at the ARO’s throat.

“If you want to live, McGowan,” Mark said, “release my man and drop the knife. We’ve got you surrounded. If you kill my man, I’ll make sure you die horribly. I’m going to make you pay for killing my wife. Eddie’s already dead. I have no problem making it a clean sweep.”

“Your wife? I don’t even know who you are!”

“Eddie started his assassination career by killing my wife. He became your hitman of choice. I didn’t have the pleasure of killing Eddie, but I could be almost as pleased to kill you. Think about it.”

“I want a deal.”

“No deals!”

To Steve’s surprise, Mark fired. The bullet ripped into McGowan’s right elbow, making him drop the knife. Steve stepped forward and knocked out the gang leader with his baton.

“I thought you’d killed him,” Steve said to Mark, pleased about the DCI’s restraint.

The DCI shrugged. “I knew Judy wouldn’t have wanted that.” He smiled at Morgan. “Also, I’d have far too much bureaucracy to take care of.”

“We would have backed you up.”

“I know. But I still have to live with myself, don’t I? Your killing Eddie was enough revenge, if I’m honest, although we can be sure this arse has probably ordered a lot more hits than Eddie’s had credit for.” He nodded to the astonished DCs, who knew that was quite a shot, one done from the hip like Rambo incarnated. “Call EMTs, and then keep a guard on this bloke. We’ll need to interrogate him.”

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Steve and Mark walked out through the fish-and-chips place together. “Too bad they’re not open,” Steve said, gesturing towards the counter with its five stools. “Where’d you learn to shoot like that?”

“A lot of practice at the range. Drills in knife-fighting as well. Lots. Eddie killed Judy with a knife.”

Steve nodded. He couldn’t imagine the man’s mental anguish back then. “Have you been looking for Eddie all these years?” Steve knew he’d be doing that if it had been Kanzi.

“For whomever was responsible for Judy’s death. Eddie was just a thief back then, but he worked for someone. There was a rash of robberies; he couldn’t have been responsible for all of them or planned them all. He was too damn stupid. For all we know, that was Pat and his mates during the gang’s infancy.”

“Pat will want a deal.”

“And we don’t need to give him one. He’s an old man as scrotes go. He’ll die in prison. This is the end of him, Steve.”

“And the other two?”

“Their turn will come. Gretchen knows how to kick ass.”

“I’ve seen that.”



Mark stopped and looked at Steve. "Don't get any ideas about accepting her offer. Our station needs you. Avon and Somerset Constabulary needs you. I need you."

Steve smiled and nodded. "And I have other reasons for staying."

He was thinking of Kanzi waiting at home for him to return. He then became sad as he remembered: Mark Hunter would have no one waiting for him.

SAMPLE

## Epilogue

“I’m surprised to see you, sir,” Steve Morgan said to the Prime Minister. Steve made a gesture towards his companion. “Allow me to introduce you to my new boss, DCI Mark Hunter. He’s replaced Harry Bond, who’s retired.”

The PM reached across the table to shake hands with both inspectors and then gestured to chairs on the table’s other side. They were in a small conference room at the Clayton Hotel. He’d asked for the meeting, and after they’d arrived, asked for his security detail to wait outside the room, although Morgan suspected that wasn’t because the PM knew that Hunter and Morgan were no danger to him.

After a few pleasantries—*the weather starts any genteel conversation*, Morgan thought—the PM got to it.

“A while ago, gentlemen, I lost a good friend, confidant, and strategist. The nation lost a patriot. I’m speaking of our Duke Frederic March.”

Hunter glanced at Morgan. *Probably wondering about the connection to their nick?* Morgan nodded to his boss and winked, hoping that Mark would understand explanations would be forthcoming, if not from the PM himself—unlikely because the man was known for his terseness—then later from Steve.

“We’re sorry for your loss, sir,” Mark said. “Is this a matter of national security?”

On the drive to the hotel, they’d been debating about the reason for the PM’s request to meet them. The PM wasn’t known for meddling very much in local affairs, including being stingy with his praise of local officials who he just expected to just do their jobs. He was known more for his ability to delegate well.

“Yes, ‘tis that, but also something very personal as well. Steve is familiar with the circumstances, although he might not realize it.” Steve must have looked astonished—he’d heard about the accident involving the duke—so the PM added some explanation. “Both China and Russia have been trying to destabilize western democracies, and the UK and US are among their prime targets. Russia has been a thorn in our side since World War Two, to say the least; China is now a ferocious and fascist economic enemy. China is our topic today.” He cleared his throat, sipped some water, and smiled at Steve.

“Steve can brief you on the details, Mark, details about a previous case that began here locally but acquired national attention. As it turned out, we now know that China took its retribution for our success by killing our dear Freddie and his wife, my friends, the duke and duchess, to be precise. That’s all that MI5 and MI6 have been able to discover.” He tapped the table. *A bit of nerves?* “They’ve tried to convince me to leave it be, but I’m not one to give up easily. I want to find the Chinese agent or agents who put a bomb in Freddie’s plane, whether it had anything to do with an ex-pat Russian who had leased that business jet, as well as who in China ordered the assassination. Because of that earlier case, I believe it all comes back to the Bristol area and the Chinese organization the police here helped expose.”

Steve shifted uneasily. “We were told to let MI5 handle that case’s clean-up.”

“By MI5 on my orders. Officially, those are still your orders. Unofficially, yours truly, your PM, wants you to try to do what neither MI5 nor MI6 could manage to do, that is, what I said previously. None of us know enough about this Kalinin bloke, for example. Because the duchess had just begun her treatments for Alzheimer’s at Kalinin’s clinic in London, I find it strange that he’d be involved, but I want proof that he’s not. I’m absolutely certain China is involved.” He tapped the table again and then sipped more water. “You’ll need someone outside

the police but with policing experience to help. I’d like to recommend the American Carl Hughes. He was involved in the case and is an ex-FBI agent—”

Steve held up a hand like a transit officer “I’ll explain who he is to Mark. But why him?”

“He can meet people and go places you two can’t. He also seemed very versatile and useful in his secondment with MI5. Of course, so were you, Steve, for a previous one. I’m sure both your clearances are still valid, and Mark’s is about finished except for his signing a few papers, but we’ll fix all that as needs must. And, for most of what I envision, all that bureaucracy won’t even be necessary.”

“How will we arrange all that with our normal work?”

The PM laughed now, nerves seeming to evaporate. “Let’s just call the whole thing overtime—with pay, of course.” He stood and gave them a little salute. “I must leave. The official reason for my stay here, in case anyone asks you, is to close on the sale of our Bristol estate here. We’re keeping the shore house, though; it has sentimental value, fond memories the old family estate doesn’t. Steve, take this opportunity to brief Mark about everything that occurred after DS Owen Wilson’s sister-in-law was shot.”

He shook hands again and left the room.

## **Kill Shot**

### **Summary**

DS Owen Wilson, one of Steve Morgan’s two detective sergeants, tells the tale of a case where a sniper murders a young athlete.

SAMPLE

### Cast of Principal Characters

Gwen Aldred—Sam’s girlfriend  
Sara Bolton—Pendleton’s PA  
Danny Crenshaw—Sam’s older brother  
Sam Crenshaw—the murder victim  
Albert “Albie” Dawson—police artist  
Ralph Emerson—one of Sam’s mates  
Archibald “Archie” Gleason—one of Sam’s old mates from his Reading childhood  
Dr. Virginia “Ginny” Graham—police pathologist  
Carl Hughes—PI, ex-FBI agent, and Betsy’s boyfriend  
Mark Hunter—Chief Detective Inspector  
Patricia “Patty” Kendall—uniformed Police Constable  
Kanzi Kimachu—lead SOCO and Steve’s girlfriend  
Siwan Lywelyn—Lowri’s sister  
Steve Morgan—Detective Inspector  
Frank Murphy—one of Sam’s mates  
Ted Newton—SOCO trainee  
Betsy O’Toole—Detective Sergeant  
Wilbur Pendleton—an attorney  
George Samuelson—Gwen Aldred’s stepfather  
Oliver Trent—one of Sam’s mates  
Lowri Wilson—Owen’s wife  
Owen Wilson—Detective Sergeant  
Clarisse Workman—Detective Inspector

## Chapter One

### At a Police Substation

The “true English”—from the toffs in the royal family all the way down the social ladder to London’s cockneys who’d make Eliza Doolittle’s father blush—look down upon “foreigners” like most anyone in Europe. (Okay, maybe Parisians are worse?) To be more explicit, the true English invented colonialism and practiced it far and wide, locally in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, and globally from America and Australia to Hong Kong and Zambia. They often express old colonial attitudes almost as much as they complain about the weather.

You’ll often find English snobs, or locals emulating them, labeling different groups as “others” and then considering those “others” as inferior. And to many on that ancient island, English snobs or otherwise, the United Kingdom means England, so the Irish in Belfast, Scots in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and Welsh in Cardiff, are also considered to be foreigners.

I suppose some of that latter bias exists because the Irish, Scotch, and Welsh often speak two languages, their native tongues and English, although even those who say they speak only the last language really speak a dialect like the Cockneys or Geordies do. I’m of Welsh descent and an exception—I know only a few words in Welsh and how to pronounce a few place names, mostly ones I know from my childhood.

At my workplace, none of this matters. We plods have all learned to live amidst the snooty and snobby citizens who do their best to emulate the royal family and live their lives as if it was still the Victorian Era. One of my immediate bosses, DI Clarisse Workman, is a black woman; the other, DI Steve Morgan, will be marrying a black woman; and my colleague, DS Betsy O’Toole, who can easily slip into the brogue of her native Ireland, or make your head spin spouting her Irish Gaelic (there’s a Scottish Gaelic as well, and Welsh is related, so my wife tells me), is shacking up with her black ex-FBI agent, Carl Hughes. I’m probably the purest of the bunch, being Welsh, and married to one of my “own people” who, along with her huge family, often swears at me in a language I can’t understand.

All that had flashed through my mind as Betsy complained about her gent, now a PI, having to travel so much for his work. That long complaint had morphed into a lengthy description of his most recent cases. We didn’t usually discuss our own because we all too often preferred to forget about them for many reasons to focus on the next. My wife Lowri in a similar setting would more likely complain about family, hers and mine, but hers was larger, nearer, and more critical of Lowri and me.

If Carl had family, they’d be back in the USA. Bets might complain about work to him, I suppose, but she avoided doing it with me. Some nosy Nelly at the police substation might hear! So, Carl’s work, which involved a lot of travel, was her usual target, again, without any details to protect the guilty.

“I don’t think he’s the proverbial sailor who has a bird in every port of call,” I told her, “so what’s your problem, hen?”

My Mam had made Da get a job at Tesco’s after he’d retired just to get the old devil out of the house. I wondered what the stats on retired wrinklies are. How many old marriages flounder after the children are gone and the husband and wife retire? It takes a lot of patience to be around the same person hour after hour, day after day. At times, I felt that critique also applied to my colleague Betsy.

She frowned. I thought maybe the question was too complicated for her during these late Friday evening discussions.

“I love Carl. He’s fun, entertaining, smart—”

“—and a good shag? Afraid of losing that handsome bloke, are you?”

“Do I sound insecure?”

“You sound crazy. He’s a keeper, Luv, and I bet he feels the same about you. He also likes it here in the UK, God knows why, but you’re his anchor here.” Thought I might be pushing the sailor analogy a bit too much, though.

“You think I’m just being paranoid?”

“When I first met you, you seemed resigned to being an old spinster. Now look at you, all aglow with Cupid’s arrows making you into a pin cushion, Um, that’s—” Although my ringtone had saved me from putting my foot farther into my mouth, I stared at that moby a moment, annoyed by the interruption. *On a Friday evening!* “’Tis the desk sergeant. Should I answer?”

“You’d better. We’re probably the only ones here now besides Earl who’re awake. Prisoners and the custodial sergeant surely have nodded off by now.”

She was there because Carl was away. I was there because Lowri and our brood were visiting family near Cardiff, so I’d volunteered for night duty to get some overtime pay. I most likely had to answer. I listened to the old desk sergeant’s message, and then ended the call with a frown on my puss.

“What’s up?” she said.

“A few young wankers were kicking a football around at Victoria Park. Seems like a sniper shot one of them. There’s uniform already there and the pathologist and SOCOs are on the way.”

“You’d best go there then. I’ll stay here for a while and hold down the fort.”

“I’ll call and let you know what’s going down.”

I should have been able to predict that having a peaceful evening at our police substation was practically impossible, although I’d thought that Betsy’s complaints about Carl’s travel would be the extent of disturbing my peace.

It then occurred to me how pathetic I was to prefer leaving for a murder scene to listen to Betsy’s complaints.

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It wasn’t hard to find the scene of the crime. Two patrol cars were at the park, their blues trying to hold back the approaching dark night. The eight young lads had made an early dart from their workplaces and met for an impromptu game of football on the cricket pitch, commendably opting for a wee bit of exercise over a quick dash to a neighborhood pub. The old gray canvas pathologist’s tent now adorned the center of the pitch.

Before visiting Doc Ginny in the tent—our police pathologist could well be in a rage because she considered every dead body an inconvenience, especially on a Friday afternoon or evening that was bridge-with-the-old-girlfriends time—I decided to take a walk in the nearby woods. One of the football enthusiasts had told me that the one shot had seemed to come from there.

SOCOs were already among the trees, but only two: Kanzi Kimachu, Steve Morgan’s girlfriend, and Ted Newton, a new trainee.

“Any spoor from the shooter?” I called over to Kanzi.

“None so far.” She pointed towards the pitch. “That’s the general L-O-S, but the likely and large azimuth error makes for only an inaccurate guess about the exact direction into the woods.”

I knew she meant the horizontal angular spread. I looked up. For her SOCO work, Kanzi often spoke more like a scientist. She was, in fact, a scientiest of sorts.

“He could have shot from a tree.”

She laughed and then saw that I was serious. “He’s right, Ted. We haven’t considered that possibility.”

Ted nodded. “For line-of-sight, not a big deal, considering the range, but for evidence, maybe.” He smiled at me. It seemed like a tolerant smile. He then nodded to Kanzi. “We have a drone in the van. How ‘bout a flyover? From both above and below, we should be able to tell if the inspector’s guess is correct.”

I’d never met Ted before. While I was chuffed that he’d assumed I was an inspector, I had to correct him. “It’s DS Owen Wilson, Ted. For now, I’m your default SIO, so I’ll be in charge for a while. The drone is a good idea. If I were a sniper, I’d prefer the tree shot. See if you can find some sniper spore among the tree branches.”

I left the two SOCOs to their tasks and made my way back to talk to Doc Ginny. I put on the Tyvek booties and plastic-wrap spacesuit the uniform outside provided me and entered her tent.

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“Detective Sergeant Wilson, welcome to my field lab once again. Inspector Morgan did an early dart this Friday, I suppose? I spoke briefly to his significant other, though, so he’s not out with her. Could be suspicious and maybe some juicy gossip to be had?”

I didn’t like what she was implying if that was the old bat’s intention—she was so pale she was translucent, so I could only imagine brief but non-respectful words from her directed at Kanzi, who was darker than Betsy’s Carl. Ginny often called the lead SOCO “that African”; she got away with a lot of outrageous things because she was one of the best at her job.

“What’s the status, Doc?”

She nodded towards the young man’s body. “Shame to waste a body built like that, I dare say. Expertly placed bullet to the head is COD. Seven witnesses say the shot came from that copse of trees, and that TOD was about an hour ago.”

“Rifle and ammo used?”

“Patience, young plod. You’ll have to wait until I get the slug out of his brain. It’s most likely still rattling around in there, so I suppose it’s low caliber. If the sniper was indeed among those trees, I’d say he didn’t use a military-style weapon—not enough damage done—but you never know ‘cause it depends on the ammo used and many other factors. Our victim’s name is Sam Crenshaw, by the way. Nice lad he was. I know his parents.”

That wasn’t surprising. Ginny was so old and had lived in the area for so long that she knew a lot of people I didn’t know and had a low opinion of most anyone. “You know everyone, Doc. I suppose I’ll have to be the one to give the parents the sad news.”

“I’m not one to second-guess Morgan, but I will do that to you: I believe someone put out on a contract on this poor lad. It looks like a pro job.”

“Um, pre-meditated murder then. I’d second your guess, to be honest. I’ll call and tell Bets to start examining his background, associates, and the like.”

She nodded. “I’ll add a variation on that theme: It’s possible the shooter mistook him for his brother. He’s older by almost two years, and that wanker’s a true hellion.”

“Thanks for that datum, as if we needed a complication. I’d better get started.”

“I don’t play nice for you, Owen. It’s for Lowri, who must suffer putting up with you.”



Ginny was known for her barbed tongue, a weapon most often used against male plods, so I let that pass. Saying anything in response would only make it worse.

“Let me or Inspector Morgan know when the PM’s scheduled. You, Kanzi, and the uniforms have things under control here, so I’m returning to the nick.”

Ginny offered no words of farewell; she simply returned to her ubiquitous Cossack dance around the dead body. I didn’t mind. Dr. Virginia Graham treated most plods like dirt, especially male ones.

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## Chapter Two

### Dinner Interrupted

I didn't stay too long at the station. Betsy had left, so I told the duty sergeant I was still on call, but I'd be out eating dinner and then be at home. Lowri had texted me to say she'd gotten blotted with her sister Siwan—the reporter had accompanied Lowri and our brood to their family home—so she'd remain in Cardiff rather than make the drive back to Bristol. That had motivated me to forget about making a meal out of leftovers found in the fridge: I entered our neighborhood pub for a pint and a late dinner to absorb it.

The place was packed. All three pool tables were busy, and a noisy and far too intense dart game was also going on. That was all off to one side and near the corner table where I'd chosen to sit, eat and drink, just to watch the locals make fools of themselves rather than hypnotically stare at the big screen tellys where old sporting events were displayed as if the place was a damn American sports bar. That opinion was probably shared by all the pool and darts players! The owner of the pub just didn't get it!

The waitperson had just delivered my half-lager—I was still technically on call, after all, so the limit to only a half—and my overdone steak slices and mountain of chips, when a bird sat down in the chair across the table from me. I knew she wasn't there to chat me up.

I vaguely remembered Gwen Aldred had been Sam Crenshaw's girlfriend at one time, and maybe she still was, because she looked like she'd been weeping. I knew her as a warm person who worked at a job that suited her, in a childcare center. One of us would have had to interview her eventually, so I'd decided I might as well get it over with. Multitasking, the Yanks call it. You sometimes can learn something by watching old reruns on the telly.

“You've heard, I suppose?”

“Aye, somebody shot Sam. Some arse with a rifle! What's this town coming to, Owen?”

The Bristol area was more a large port city than a simple English country town, but I got her point. Yet, who'd told Gwen that a rifle bullet had ended Sam's life? I'd just learned that myself.

“Gwen, who told you about what happened to Sam?”

I knew she couldn't be the sniper 'cause she'd once participated in a protest at the police department's gun range. Most of us carried batons if we carried any weapons—a habit we'd acquired as tops on patrol—but we still practiced with firearms, some coppers like Morgan had military training, and the AROs had to stay sharp, so that protest hadn't set well with some of us. Plods can't adequately protect the citizenry if they're outgunned by the bad blokes! That happens all too often here in the UK and is even more common in the US, even if you only see it on telly reruns (and believe what you see).

She shrugged. “'Twas on Facebook, you daft rozzer. Both Danny and Ralph's accounts.”

I nodded. Danny was Sam's older brother, to whom Doc Ginny had referred; I mentally ran through my list of Sam's companions, and remembered that Ralph Emerson was one of the eight lads who'd been at the cricket pitch along with Sam. So I knew how Ralph had known—he'd been there! I'd be asking Danny, Ginny's “hellion,” how he'd known.

I made a groan deepened by trying to swallow a greasy chip. “Ralph didn't post a pic of Sam's body, did he?”

She shook her head. “Thank God! Just one of the pathologist's tent with a description of what went down. Also posted a video of two SOCOs walking towards some woods. I called Ralph, and he told me what happened.”

*Damn mobiles!* I thought. I then realized that Steve Morgan would be pissed that Kanzi could be seen on Facebook and maybe Instagram all over the UK and beyond. No name, I hoped. I also hoped I wouldn't get blamed for that.

“What can you add to Ralph's story?” Gwen said.

That should have been by question. I dipped a chip into some ketchup—I'd also sprinkled them with extra vinegar, so the mountain of chips was tart, saucy, and greasy, just like I liked them and Lowri hated—and I munched on that crisped chip a bit more than required as I thought through what I could tell her. I decided to be a minimalist. “Not much more. Nothing that should matter to you. Don't worry. We'll get the shooter.” Didn't want to say more than that. Even though it'd been a head shot, his head hadn't been blown apart; so rifle, yes, high-powered ammo, no. Wasn't going to describe the young lad's pale skin and open but sightless eyes either.

She also wouldn't be interested in my noble efforts to set up a murder board back at the station. I'd also quickly typed up a case summary and sent it as an attachment to an email to team members in preparation for the expected briefing that would take place the next morning where hopefully I'd hand off my SIO duties to Detective Inspector Steve Morgan.

“No suspects?” she insisted.

Thinking of some of the god-awful barneys she and Sam often had in public—I'd witnessed a few in that same pub—I could have said, “Maybe you?” I didn't. All I needed was Gwen bouncing between rage and weeping to further ruin my dinner.

Instead, I said, “Any suggestions?”

“He had a temper and could be a nasty drunk sometimes, but never as bad as his brother. Both are like their old man in that sense, so Sam might have riled some people, but that wouldn't be enough for anyone to shoot him. Otherwise, you'd have bloated bastards' bodies piled up in the streets, especially in the downtown areas.” She stood. “I'll leave you in peace now.”

I stood too and then reached over across the table, firstly to tap her on the shoulder to express some condolences and then hand her my card. “If you can think of anything that might help us find Sam's murderer, no matter how trivial it might seem to you, please let me know.”

She nodded, accepting the platitude; turned; and left. On her way out, I saw her wipe away more tears. A woman's love can be a strange thing at times.

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“I wouldn't have done anything different,” Steve told me after we'd chatted early the next morning about my report. “And your suggestions for our next steps are spot on. We'll divide up the work at the meeting later, but I'd better go give Mark a pre-brief. Want to come along?”

I'll confess I felt a bit chuffed after his praise and invitation, although the latter gave me pause. “I'm not sure I can add anything to that pre-brief.” It wasn't modesty, just honesty; even though I'd written that report quickly, there was little more I had to say. I don't put conjectures in reports. No one should. You can talk about them in a meeting but not in a report.

“Nonsense. And don't feel that there's pressure to do that. You'll be doing me a favor. You were at the scene, not me, after all. Mark might have some questions I can't answer 'cause I wasn't there. And this could become a complex case where three sharp minds can do more than two—or four if we can get Bets involved. All hands onboard, Owen.” He paused to eye me. “One thing: You didn't put Ginny's comment about Danny in your report. Do you think Ginny's wrong to think that the shooter might have confused Sam and Danny? You know them both better than I do.”

“I always take what the pathologist says with a grain of salt, Steve, especially when she’s bloviating about male plods.”

“Aye, I know what you mean. But maybe we shouldn’t discount her comment this time. You were perhaps right to keep it out of your report—it’s more of a conjecture bordering on a conspiracy theory, if I’m honest—hers, not yours, and not a solid theory, at least for now—but mention it to Mark in that manner, and we’ll see what he says. Maybe another stone to look under, I dare say. Kanzi’s report will also be in before our team’s meeting. That might generate a few more assignments. I’ll be interested to see if that idea about using a drone came to anything.”

We walked together from the open-plan area, where most of the CID officers had their desks, to DCI Mark Hunter’s office that looked out over that area. Steve’s was next to Mark’s, with no view; and Clarisse’s was farthest in, with a view of the car park’s rear. Steve rapped on the DCI’s door because it was closed, a rare occurrence.

He opened it, mobile still in hand, explaining the closed door. He put a finger to his lips and then gestured towards the two chairs in front of his desk. He paced behind them, from one overflowing bookcase to the other, mostly listening. Finally, he rang off, walked around his desk, and plopped into his desk chair.

“Super was all over me about the Sam Crenshaw case. What do we know? I saw your report by the way, Owen. Good work.”

“Not much we can add to that report yet, Mark, to answer your question,” Steve said. “We’re just getting started. SOCOs’ report’s arriving shortly; pathologist’s coming soon as well, I hope; canvassing has begun, although the park where the shooting occurred is a bit far from any residences or businesses.”

Mark eyed me. “I know not everything gets into reports, especially those written on a Friday night. Any additions you want to make, Owen? I’ll redact them accordingly before I pass anything on to the Super.”

“No, but Steve’s the SIO now. We’ll sort assignments at our briefing. You’re welcome to attend, sir.”

The DCI smiled and winked at Morgan. “Mark, just Mark. As you know, in most cases, I’m the team’s only protection against the politicians above me. You’re on that team. However, because you took over as SIO when you needed to, I’d like to mention that to the Super in case one day you go for a promotion. I’ve reviewed your work. You’ve already well handled a case when Clarisse and Steve were busy elsewhere: That suicide that wasn’t a suicide.”

I felt myself turning red. “Yes sir. I did my best.”

Morgan smiled and winked at me. He knew I’d pulled a few tricks out of my bag to close that case. The Crown’s Prosecution Service had let them pass...or hadn’t learned about them! It had helped that we had plenty of evidence, including confessions.

“Steve, I want you to give this case top priority. While I don’t know them, Sam Crenshaw’s parents are old friends of the Super and his wife. Get Betsy involved and let me know if you need more personnel. And put a watch on Danny Crenshaw. If he was confused with Sam, he still might be a target.”

“Do you think there’s a vendetta going on?” I asked.

“I don’t know what to think, but the Bristol area isn’t a fucking military battlefield, for God’s sake! Snipers aren’t welcome here on our patch.”

### Chapter Three

#### Danny Crenshaw

After our meeting where Kanzi had begun by presenting both the prelim pathology report and indeterminate forensics spoor, a piece of cloth ripped from a shirt discovered in a tree, we ended with many assignments being handed out. Steve and I left to pay Danny Crenshaw a visit after we gave the bad news to the brothers' parents. Their father was angrier about Sam's murder than sad, urging us to nick Sam's killer dead or alive, preferably dead. Between her rivers of tears, their mother went on and on about how Gwen could never be able to give them any grandchildren now. Brother Danny was more stoic.

Sam's brother crossed his fingers and showed both hands to us. "We were as tight as that, officers. Maybe as close as identical twins."

I smiled as Steve said, "Perhaps more like Jekyll and Hyde, so I've heard."

Danny frowned. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You were the black sheep of the family, and he was the innocent white lamb."

"Okay, maybe there's some truth to that. I'm a bit older, and I did a few bad things as a wild kid, things I'm not proud of now that I'm more mature. But I was closer to him than any of his mates were. He tried to keep me on the straight and narrow; I tried to take care of him because some of his peers liked to bully or tease him. That's all long past now. He learned quickly to take care of himself."

"Did you know the other lads who were with him?"

He shrugged. "Knew of them. They were Sam's mates, not mine. He was the best of the nine."

"Nine?" I asked. "There were only eight there at the park, including Sam."

"Yes, Oliver was missing. Oliver Trent. Ollie had to attend a wedding down in Glastonbury."

"Part of the wedding party, was he?" Steve said.

"No. Groom was Archie Gleason, an old chum from the schooldays when we lived in Reading. We knew him donkey's years ago, but Archie and Sam maintained contact using social media: emails and the like. They were also both into computers from age six on, or thereabouts."

"You're not?" I said, looking to determine some difference between the two brothers.

"Oh, they weren't into Facebook, Instagram, and all that nonsense. More into computer games, like. Started way back with them Atari play stations. Amazing what two years' difference in age can do when you're that young. Sam was a computer whiz; me, not so much. That's how he met Gwen Aldred. Um, now there's someone who could have topped Sam when she'd get angry at him, especially if you put a gun in her hand. Our parents always said that Gwen and Sam were like Katherine and Petruccio in old Snakeshite's *Taming of the Shrew*."

I decided that Danny had a low opinion of Shakespeare who'd lived not far up the Avon in Stratford, maybe the most famous person from our Bristol area, although Dylan Thomas, born in Swansea, just west of Cardiff, could compete with "the bard" and was a Welsh national hero.

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"I understand that Gwen didn't like guns," Steve said.

"That came later after one of her uncles was killed. Stupid hunting accident, really, up in the hills towards Snowdonia on the uncle's farm. Don't much like guns myself, to be honest. If I ever find the eejit who killed Sam, I'd rather beat him to death with my own fists. A shot between the eyes would be too good for the bastard." He looked at me, biro hovering over my

notebook. "Don't write that down, you fool! I don't even own a gun, and I'm generally a peaceful bloke. Only a few pub barneys now and then when some bloated bastard creates problems. Some sot wants a fistfight, I give him one."

"Yes, you've got form," Steve said. "Our records show you're anything but peaceful, but I suppose we're biased and don't pay enough attention to when you go to church and repent for your sins." He smiled at Danny and winked at me. "Do you know anyone who would want to kill your brother?"

"Only the government a while back. They were going to make both of us train for combat, but Da got us out of that obligation 'cause we have to help with the farming."

"Your parents don't live on a farm. We just came from their house."

"Da leases the land from some dickless London toff. Has done so for years. You'll find it up by Gwen's uncle's place, as a matter of fact."

"Do you have this London bloke's address?" I said.

"No, but I can get it easily enough. Toff works in the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. He's a member of the Foreign Secretary's staff. Swelled head who thinks he's a VIP. Got more money than brains, I dare say. He looks like Rowan Atkinson, that famous bumbling eejit. Da came up with that analogy, by the way."

"Does your father manage the farm for this VIP?"

"Not the mansion or outbuildings, nothing beyond what's needed for running the farm. There's a groundskeeper in charge of the residential shite, and his wife oversees the mansion's staff when she's there. The toff uses the residence and stables for holiday retreats only a few times per year. We love it when the toffs come to watch us sweat, you know."

Steve and I both smiled at the ironic statement. "Do your father and the owner get along?"

"I wouldn't say that. They're just employee and employer, to be honest. All Da's hard work brings in enough money to keep the damn place afloat. Probably pays for some of the toff's privileged life in the Old Smoke as well."

I was tiring of Danny Crenshaw. I could tell Steve was too. He wound down the interview, and we left to return to the station.

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"There are a lot of moving parts in this case, Owen," Steve said during the way back to the station. "We need to talk to that couple who run that estate up Snowdonia way. We also need to officially have a chat with Gwen and one with Ollie."

"Perhaps he didn't stay for the reception?" I said with a smile. "Or perhaps Gwen's hatred of guns is only a ruse?"

"Right now, we have a dearth of suspects, Owen. There's every indication that the murder was done by a hitman, but who hired him and why?"

"The two brothers look alike. Someone who didn't know them that well could have mistaken Sam for Danny. I hate to say Ginny might be right, but we need to see if anyone had it in for Danny."

"There's that too, another moving part, damn it! And we saw that Danny's appreciation of Gwen didn't match Sam and Danny's parents'. This Gwen seems to have a temper that she has a hard time controlling, at least verbally. A long way from committing murder perhaps, but there have been cases where an angry woman can lose control."

"Um, you didn't see her in the pub. She was more distraught than angry, Steve. And she works in a daycare center. That at least implies some patience."

“Maybe some of their fighting was because she didn’t approve of Sam’s mates or others he spent time with. Um, we need to look at that fascination with computer games as well. There have been cases where a losing gamer traveled many miles to get revenge by killing his opponent. It’s a strange world.”

“At least that much we can agree on.”

SAMPLE

## Chapter Four

### Ralph Emerson and Oliver Trent

Betsy and I visited Ralph Emerson. He was a gentle giant, possessing a body more appropriate for rugby than for football, more above the waist than above, even though the legs were tree stumps. He kept muttering, “I can’t believe someone murdered my mate!” Made me wonder if he was even closer to Sam than brother Danny was. We only got an additional “He had no enemies—everyone loved him!” for the most part, so I asked him about Oliver Trent.

He didn’t have many good things to say about that mate who’d not been present at the spontaneous football game when Sam was killed at the park. “That Ollie’s got a helluva serious problem,” Ralph summarized after spewing a shitload of criticism bordering on vitriol. “Can’t hold down a job ‘cause he goes in and out of rehab. Uses petty thefts to finance his use of drugs, and that makes him the target of both dealers and you plods, ones downtown for the most part. Lives almost rough in a stinking bedsit—even sleeps on the floor. It’s not far from that mosque near your station. He kips there with other wankers who come and go, all addicts. Place always reeks of weed, but I’ve seen signs of other drugs there as well. At least the MJ stink hides the odors from the garbage.”

“Do you have an address for him?” I asked. “We know he’s got form, but he doesn’t answer his mobile.”

“Might have sold it. He steals them, you see, uses them a bit, and then sells or tosses them. Or he buys a cheap pay-as-you-go model and uses that for a while. I can give you the most recent number I’ve got, but it might not be valid. Your best bet is to catch him at that tip where he lives.”

“Would he have any reason to kill Sam?” Betsy said.

“We all get on his case about the drugs use, Sam especially, but that’s not enough aggro that Ollie’d want to kill any of us, Sam especially, who does what he can to help old Ollie. Even buys him groceries sometimes. They’ve been friends for years.”

“Sam had enough extra money to do that?” Betsy continued.

“Of all of us, he had the best gig. Headed up the IT Department at some attorneys’ office. Knew more about computer tech than MI5 or MI6, I’d wager.”

I glanced at my past notes. “We have him working for Citywide Relocation Experts, basically a moving service.”

Ralph laughed. “That was when he was getting his union card. He’s got some sort of basic IT degree. Sam knew a lot about wi-fi and LANs and all that shite. I think he might have been playing with computers before he even learned to walk.”

“I assume that law office is local,” Betsy said. “Can you give any more information about it?”

“It’s downtown somewhere. I’ll have to send you their contact info.”

“Is it specialized in some aspect of law?”

“Focuses on corporate property deals, I believe, but they’re into most everything legal. The office name is just a list of the partners—four, I believe. Lots of slaves like Sam, of course, to do the real work. That’s often the case, about the office name, I mean, but it makes it hard to remember. I’ll send it to you if you give me an email address.”

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Because Oliver Trent’s bedsit was on our way back to the station, Betsy and I took a chance and visited it. An emaciated woman dressed in a thread-bare nightgown answered the



door, possibly too high on drugs to be embarrassed by her appearance. "Whatcha want Ollie for?" was the way she answered my inquiry.

I spotted a half-naked man disappearing out a back window.

"Stay here!" I told Betsy, who'd also seen the man scarpering.

I took the rickety stairs two at a time, went around the corner, and met Ollie coming from the alleyway. Eejit came right at me with no indication of stopping. I whacked him with my baton to put him down and then put the handcuffs on him.

"I'm innocent!" he repeatedly yelled at me as I marched him back and stuffed him into the rear of our unmarked patrol car behind the iron-mesh screen.

Betsy soon joined us on the street after I called her. "I had to threaten that woman with arrest. What are we going to charge this SOB with?"

"Assaulting a police officer will do for now. He came at me like a wild bull from Pamplona."

"Um, I'm not sure where Pamplona is, but that might only be a misdemeanor."

"So what? It will give us enough time to question the wanker back at the station."

"In other circumstances, I'd say we could question him here, but did you smell that bedsit?"

"Eau de loo. No surprise, Bets. Maybe we should bring in the roomie as well? Play one off against the other?"

"And stink up our charming little police station? No way! I'll call the narco lads and let them decide that to do with the roomie and anyone else they find in that tip."

"I wouldn't bother. All the evidence will be gone already. Let's take Mr. Trent back to the station and grill him. I want to know if he's got an alibi for yesterday afternoon and evening."

Ollie was already showing signs of withdrawal symptoms by the time we sat with him in IR2. I'd gotten him a duty solicitor—Ollie had insisted on it, probably thinking we were going to fit him up for drugs trafficking charges. That might eventually occur, but it wouldn't be our gig. I'd already sent his info off to the narco lads. They could do what they wanted with Ollie later, like his girlfriend, after we'd had our go at him. I didn't want to torture the poor bastard, but we needed to ask him our questions before he got too desperate for a fix.

"How was the wedding in Glastonbury, Ollie?" Betsy began.

"Like-like any other wedding, ma'am." He looked relieved. Maybe because Bets hadn't started the interrogation asking about drugs trafficking? "My old chum's got real responsibilities now. One-one thing's knocking up some hen; 'tis another to marry her."

"The bride was pregnant?"

"A few months along, I'd say. I-I think her old man's makin' a feckin' mistake: Archie isn't good husband material."

As if he were qualified to determine that! "Is he addicted to drugs like you are, Ollie?" I asked. Might as well get it out of the way!

"Nah. I got hooked here in Bristol. Archie's clean. Always has been, 'cept for an ale or lager now and then. His sin's always been not being able to keep it in his pants."

"What about that woman Ellie?" Betsy said. Ellie Bishop was the living skeleton from the bedsit the narcos would be questioning.

"Hah, that bird will shag anyone for a hit. She's community property, she is. Better than being a kerb-crawler, I suppose."

Betsy made a face and then looked like she was about ready to explode. Couldn't really blame her. The wanker was a sleazey turd. I took over. "When did you leave Glastonbury, Ollie?"

"Didn't stay for the reception, did I? Left about five or so, just after the I-dos. Was somewhat certain Archie wouldn't be handing out any drugs, so I wanted to get home to my stash, to be honest. Ellie's a good hen, you see. She had some fresh stuff waiting for me."

"Does Archie know about your drugs habit?" Betsy said.

"Maybe, but it's not like we see much of each other now. That wedding was only a little jaunt down memory lane for us, very old memories, to be honest. We go way back, we two do."

We could do the calculation for his trip, Bets and I. Ollie couldn't have made it back to northern Bristol until after Sam was killed.

"What do you know about Sam Crenshaw's job?" I asked, more because we only knew where he worked and little else.

He shrugged. "General IT stuff for some law office. Sam said they handle a lot of commercial properties sales. He's head of the IT Department, though, so he probably makes good money." He suddenly looked sad. "'Made,' suppose I should say."

I realized that we'd have to investigate that some more. 'Commercial properties' could imply that lots of money was involved, and, with large sums of money, people sometimes took shortcuts to close deals, some of them illegal, from guaranteeing future tax evasions to bribes. Or was I just being a poor and envious plod?

## Chapter Five

### Wilbur Pendleton, Esquire

“We will surely miss Sam at our workplace here,” said Wilbur Pendleton, Esquire, of Anderson, Hartwell, Pendleton, and Rogers.

Steve and I were in the lawyer’s office sitting in front of an old but elegant desk suite that formed a large U with the attorney lost inside. One side of that U had a laptop perched on top, the other several telephones, including a mobile. The bottom of the U that we faced had only an old-fashioned Rolodex on it.

Pendleton looked like a gnome but maybe not very elegant in his three-piece suit. Maybe seventy-years-old or so, he reminded me of that ancient US president on one of that poor fellow’s worst days—a gaunt little man with sunken cheeks, hooked nose, and a monk’s tonsure making his appearance seem threatening because he appeared to be some predatory bird. His hands covered with blue veins served as the raptor’s talons.

I didn’t like the bloke when I first saw him, and I liked him even less the more time I spent in that office. But, to be honest, I don’t like lawyers that much anyway. That’s an occupational hazard, of course, because that group includes a lot of despicable parasites like Crown prosecutors and defense barristers, both subsets often working against poor plods who are only trying to protect the UK’s citizenry.

“Can you describe Sam’s duties, Mr. Pendleton?” Steve asked the little gnome whom no one would ever want to protect their garden.

To the wanker’s credit, he tried, but it was clear that he knew only a little about Sam, only that his employee had done the job he’d been assigned with the help of his staff.

“Would he have been involved in anything in his official capacity that might have led to his murder?”

The attorney’s expression was telling: He actually smiled. It was a nervous but not evil smile, though. “Clients often need access to our documents, and vice versa. Software compatibility issues are always solved by the IT Department, so they’d often see everyone’s files. That’s all private data, of course, for all parties involved in a deal, but I’ll assure you that our IT employees sign non-disclosure agreements and wouldn’t be privy to anything that would cause someone to commit murder. We’re a legal institution that rigidly follows current law.”

“Unless someone in IT accidentally happens to see something that clients involved in a deal don’t want anyone to see?” I said.

Pendleton frowned at me, as if I had no right to comment. I returned the frown; Steve saw that.

“My detective sergeant makes a good point, Mr. Pendleton. Perhaps you should let us look at your recent clients’ legal papers and communications.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible. All our documents are hyper-confidential, probably as secret as anything the government produces, and I repeat, all our employees have signed perfectly legal NDAs agreeing to that secrecy. Police officers fail to understand any legal aspects beyond legal proceedings. They can become quite complicated and often as secret as anything the Official Secrets Act might cover.”

That seemed a bit repetitive and very braggadocio, but I supposed old Pendleton wanted to make things clear to us poor dumb plods. Steve put him in his place, though:

“We’re discussing a murder case here, one where one of your most trusted employees was the victim. If you won’t cooperate willingly, we can get a warrant.”

Instead of exploding in righteous anger, Pendleton sighed. "What legal document here could possibly have led to Sam's murder?"

"You see," I said, "That's precisely the problem. You have no idea. We have the experience that allows us to make those decisions; you don't."

"And it could be something very obvious," Steve added, winking at me. "Perhaps an email offering a bribe to facilitate the deal? Or an 'official price' for a property that's much lower than fair-market value to soften the tax burden?" Steve had created quotation marks with his index fingers. "We've seen a lot of fraudulent activities, both Detective Sergeant Wilson and I, so we don't need to be very creative to imagine the worst."

"Not involving a reputable firm like ours, I'm sure."

Steve bristled. "Mr. Pendleton, we base our investigations on facts, and your firm's history, which is unknown to us, doesn't necessarily guarantee that current facts about how you operate haven't changed. With all the new construction going on in the Bristol area, commercial and residential, it must surely have changed, in fact, if anything, because of rising prices."

"We're a traditionally oriented firm, Inspector—traditional and reputable."

Steve smiled. "Have any employees been murdered before?"

"No. And I'm sure—"

"—as I am that means things have changed!" He pointed a finger at the attorney. "We can limit the number of detectives who examine your business records and interview the employees. Those can sign a non-disclosure agreement, but we need to be allowed to do that, or it's obstruction of justice on the part of this firm. We'll especially need to interview the employees from the IT Department. Hindering us in that investigative process isn't advisable and will be frowned on by the CPS."

Pendleton glared at Steve. "Then we're through here for now, officers. I don't want to see you again until you've got your damn warrant!"

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As I drove back to our station, I asked Steve, "Can we get a warrant?"

"Maybe. They could try to make a good case for attorney-client privilege, I suppose. We should be able to interview the IT employees at least. We don't even need a warrant to do that. And if they just so happen to chat about some privileged information, so what? We might not need it at all. We'll see how it goes. I think I'll let Bets handle that. She did a good job getting info about that cult leader's sneaky legal machinations made to defraud his acolytes."

I shivered and gripped the steering wheel more tightly. That cult leader had been one weird dude! An even angrier dude, a terrorist, had applied his own brand of justice to that cult leader after almost killing Steve.

"I think we should have Mark at least try to get the warrant just in case Bets needs it."

"I plan to do that. Mark's not the problem; the Super is. But there's no reason Betsy can't get started with the IT personnel now. Look out!"

I was already taking evasive action. A lorry had crept into my lane and was heading directly for us. I managed to reach the road's shoulder, but the van clipped the tail end of our little police car, spinning it around. The car hit the road's border and flipped over. I smelled petrol!

"Get out!" I yelled at Steve.

He was already opening his door. He dropped to the ground and circled the car to help me out.

"I'm calling for backup. That was intentional, Owen!"

I looked along the road. The lorry had disappeared. So much for staying at the scene of the accident! Maybe Steve was right? Was someone trying to warn us off?

Someone in the IT Department of Anderson, Hartwell, Pendleton, and Rogers? Maybe Wilbur Pendleton, Esquire himself? More likely one of his lackeys.

We both managed to call our significant others, Kanzi and Lowri, before backup patrol cars, fire engines, and ambulances arrived. A tow lorry showed up last. There were many accidents in the Bristol area and, given the media’s efficient reporting of all the damage to our car, including the fire, news about our accident would be broadcast soon. No one had been injured, but the roll-over and torching of a police patrol car would spike the public’s interest. And perhaps make some of them cheer?

SAMPLE

## Chapter Six

### Post-Crash Analysis

Steve surprised him; he remembered the lorry’s plate number. We learned soon enough from witnesses and ANPR cameras that it had ended up in a field just off a nearby country lane. It belonged to a leasing agency, essentially confirming Steve’s determination that we’d been targeted. The agency wouldn’t divulge the customer’s name without a warrant. We couldn’t force that because we’d need to argue that it was somehow connected to Sam’s murder.

“The question is why were you two targeted,” Bets said as we three butted heads in Steve’s office.

“If we were, we might be able to zero in on a reason by interrogating that law firm’s employees,” Steve said. “Start with their IT employees. I’ll get Mark to work on a warrant. We’ll probably need it to speak to the partners as well as look at the firm’s records—maybe to any other employees, in fact. It’s too much coincidence that we left there only to be attacked on our way back here.”

“Coincidences do occur,” Bets said.

“Yes, so in a case like this, they’re the first thing to eliminate from our investigation. And either Ollie or Ellie could have planned to have us killed.”

“Aren’t they too hooked on drugs to plan something like that?” I said.

“Yes, but they could have inadvertently mentioned our interrogating them to whomever killed Sam. It’s possible that some of the particulars know the assassin without realizing it.”

“There are many possibilities,” Bets said. “Early days.”

I smiled at her use of the old cliché we often used with the public, media, and politicians. But she was right. “We need to start eliminating those possibilities,” I said.

Steve had been tapping his desktop. “To that end, let’s meet in half an hour. Somebody should take a look at that lease agency’s security camera footage. I’ll go meet with Mark meanwhile. Whoever ordered that attack wants to make this personal. I can do personal!”

## Chapter Seven

### George Samuelson

Steve had sat with Albert Dawson aka Albie, an artist who sometimes did portraits of suspects for us using witnesses' descriptions, my DI being the witness in this case because my recollection of the crash was poor—I'd been more focused on avoiding it,,and not dying! Steve had only seen the lorry driver from afar through two dirty windscreens, but we began to show the sketch to most anyone we interviewed, past and present. Frank Murphy, one of the football players at the park, thought he recognized the wanker.

"He looks a bit like George Samuelson," Murphy said. "Or a relative, if I'm honest."

"Tell me more about this George," PC Kendall, Frank's interviewer, insisted.

"He's Gwen Aldred's stepfather. He was always telling poor Gwen that she was too good for Sam. George thought Sam wasn't going anywhere in life, even after he landed that great IT job. Maybe George thought it was too low paying?"

"Being head of an IT Department wasn't good enough for Mr., Samuelson?"

Frank nodded. "George probably thought Sam and us mates were just drunk gamers, I'm guessing. We were that years ago. Time changes people. He's just too old and stupid not to realize that computer techs are often paid well, certainly enough to feed a family. He's a bit of a Neanderthal, if I'm honest."

"What does George do for a living?"

"He serves papers for that same law office, last I heard."

"Then maybe he did know Sam was doing okay financially, but he just hated Sam?"

"Could be that's it. Can't say I understand the situation completely. You should interview old George. He'll certainly give you an earful."

PC Kendall could only find me, not Steve, to receive her report and pass on that recommendation. I decided to wait until Steve was in and then passed the recommendation on to him. I wasn't convinced the incident with the van had anything to do with Sam's death; Steve wasn't either.

"Okay, let's bring this George Samuelson in. We can use either excuse to grill him, what Murphy said about the lorry driver maybe being George, or about George hounding Gwen about Sam."

I smiled and nodded. "I expect some fireworks either way."

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George was always ready to be an errand boy for the firm as they processed their cases, so he was in and out of the office a lot. Or maybe he was more than an errand boy? When Steve and I entered IR1, I saw a thuggish arse with a mean scowl. I immediately assumed that he was a mean-tempered SOB. Maybe he had to be to serve papers to other mean-tempered SOBs?

Poor Gwen! She'd had made a choice in choosing Sam, but she hadn't had one for choosing a stepfather. I thought maybe her mam had been desperate? Yet every copper knows women who don't feel loved if their old man doesn't slap them around a bit. I think that's changing...but slowly. Cases still occur, and they keep many uniforms busy.

Someone from that law office could probably have taken on the role of being George's solicitor, but the surly wanker refused to have one. When PC Kendall had gone to fetch him, he'd told George the interview was only for us to glean information about Sam. He was prepared for that, and he had nothing good to say about his stepdaughter's boyfriend.

"Good riddance, I must say. He might be of some use feeding the worms."

"Not a fan of his, I'm guessing," Steve said. "Feel like giving your reasons? We know very little about Mr. Crenshaw."

That was false, of course. We knew more about him every day that passed. Even Wilbur Pendleton had said he'd be missed at the law firm.

"I knew him well, even got that cushy job for him. Not up to it, though. Taking care of a company's computers is a lot different than playing computer games. That's all he and his drunken mates did as bairns."

I was almost certain that Pendleton *et alis* hadn't paid much attention to George's recommendation...if he ever made one! "Seems like the partners were happy with his work. We talked with Mr. Pendleton."

"Mr. Pendleton doesn't know his arse from a punching bag. The partners couldn't survive without their staff. That includes both me and Sam, doing grunt work for them toffs. That's how it always is, of course. For all you know, King Charlie's main butler makes all the most important decisions for the UK."

I could tell Steve thought we were wasting our time with George. He said, "Does one of your duties include driving a lorry, Mr. Samuelson?"

"Sometimes. Why?"

"Can you be a bit more explicit?"

"I pick up or deliver a lot of boxes of legal documents at times. So much for the paperless office. I'm guessing that attorneys all over the UK do their patriotic duty keeping the paper mills in business."

"Does the firm own a lorry to do that?"

"No, we lease them. I suppose the attorneys think that's less expensive. Might be, as far as I know. Maybe not as safe, though. Seems like I'm always driving an old clunker that spews black smoke and wastes petrol. As my silly stepdaughter calls them, 'a smelly old polluter that's terrible for the environment.'"

"I don't see why that's silly," I commented.

"You're about her age. Maybe a Greenie as well? Figures."

"Did you lease a lorry for the firm yesterday?"

George thought a moment. "Maybe one of my lads did. I'd have to ask. Why do you care?"

Steve slid a paper towards George containing the lorry's plate number. "This one was leased by Harry Black. Does he work with you?"

"Never heard of 'im."

I could tell he was lying, but what about in reference to the lorry?

"You weren't in the office all day yesterday. PC Kendall found you at a pub today. Where were you otherwise?"

"Um, do I need a solicitor?"

"I can't answer that except to state that you said you didn't. Did my question make you think you do?"

"A bit like you're trying to fit me with something involving a lorry."

"Maybe I am. But onward. When you're out and about delivering or receiving boxes of legal documents, are you ever threatened?"

George stood. "Look at me. Do you think anyone can threaten me and get away with it?"

"Sit down, Mr. Samuelson." George sat and glared at us. "So, part of your job is to intimidate people so they don't try anything then?"



"Like I said, they've never tried."

"So that is part of your job. You don't travel with a guard or guards as if you were driving a bank vehicle?"

"Um, there could be a guard when securities are involved, delivering or picking up. The guard would be armed in that case."

"So, there's a certain amount of responsibility involved in your work."

"Of course there is! It's a feekin' legal office, for God's sake!"

"And it wouldn't be appropriate for you to develop a little bit of road rage against other drivers?"

"Um, I can lose control when in heavy traffic at times, but nothin' more than a few cuss words like everyone has."

"So, you'd never use your vehicle like a weapon?"

"Of course not. I could lose my license that way!"

I was perplexed. Steve winked at me.

"Thank you for coming in, Mr. Samuelson."

He stood. "I thought this was to be about Sam. You hardly asked me anything about him."

"I don't want to keep you from your duties. Some other time."

I saw his chin drop: He'd realized that Steve was leaving him with a threat hanging. And because I knew George had been lying about a lot of things, Steve wanted to get more evidence on the scrote!

## Chapter Eight

### Following the Leads

So, we let George Samuelson go, but Steve asked two DCs to follow him but keep out of sight so he didn't realize it.

“He's clearly hiding something,” Steve said to me after we left the station several minutes later after George and his PC usher had left.

“I agree,” I said. “More likely the reason for the incident with the lorry. And he had no respect for Sam nor sadness about Gwen's loss. But I don't think he killed Sam.”

“Yet he might have a good idea about who did. Can you see if he was in the military?”

“As a sniper?” I said with a grin.

“Actually, I want to know a lot more about Mr. Samuelson. He could be hiding something completely unrelated to Sam's murder.”

“I'll see what I can find. You?”

“I'm off to ask Betsy how the interviews with those IT blokes are coming along.”

“I'll tell her to come around and see you after I visit her in the CID.”

Turned out that Bets had nothing yet on Sam's colleagues, so we focused on Samuelson. He had recent form but only for some pub brawls between bloated blokes. More interesting was his discharge record from the army containing commendations for his two tours in Afghanistan. He'd been a sniper there at the beginning of that conflict, not towards the end like Morgan. Did that make him Sam's killer?

I still found that hard to believe. There were farmers around who could probably shoot better than old George now. Wasn't hard to imagine how impossible it'd be finding and interviewing everyone in the area who could shoot a gun well. There could be hundreds of blokes like that—every ARO, for example, and even some women.

That led me to another thought: Could some bird Sam had previously abandoned in favor of Gwen be, A, a damn good shooter, and B, totally pissed with Sam and jealous of Gwen?

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I returned to Betsy's desk. “Did Sam work with any females in that IT Department?”

“One. She's an ex-gamer too, but also a lesbian. I can tell.”

“Came onto you, did she?”

“No, more like hostile towards me...and maybe racist? She saw Carl drop me off and pick me up at the law office so PC Kendall didn't have to chauffeur me and could go home. There was a Nazi swastika tattooed on her left shoulder with ‘Was Hitler right?’ under the tat.”

“At least it was a question,” I said with a smile. “You'd think that Pendleton and associates wouldn't want anyone with those views working there.”

“Let's not go down that road. And I believe that tat's covered when she's working.”

“Anyroad, she'd have not been pursuing Sam.” I thought a moment. “What about any other female workers? Non-partners, PAs, and so forth? Maybe one of them is a gun lover.”

“We can't interview them until we get that damn warrant.”

“Yes, but we have their names, right? Let's see if they've anything to do with guns, ex-military or otherwise.”

We volunteered three uniforms to help us out with that. PC O'Brien came up with a possibility: Sara Bolton, Pendleton's PA, hadn't been in the military, but O'Brien found a photo of her proudly holding a skeet-shooting trophy for winning a contest run by a local gun club. She had to have a sponsor from the club to enter. Hers had been George Samuelson!

The club was in a small village, now not much more than a bedroom community a bit northwest of our station and off the M4 motorway to Cardiff towards Thornbury. We also discovered that both George and Sara lived in that little enclave.

“I think we should go to that legal office to have a little chinwag with Ms. Bolton,” I said.

“Let me check on the warrant. We might want to talk to some other employees as well as get our uniforms started on the legal documents.”

“I’ll go grab a car from the pool. Meet me out front.”

SAMPLE

## Chapter Nine

### Sara Bolton

I didn't need to be a detective to realize Betsy had the warrant: Two patrol cars, each one with four PCs, parked behind me as I waited for her. She left the building and waved the warrant at me before getting in.

“D-Day is here,” I said. “Mr. Prissy Pendleton isn't going to be a happy man.”

Betsy laughed. “Neither will Sara Bolton or the other employees. We all must sign non-disclosure agreements, though. I have Mark and Steve's here.”

A functioning law office can be busy, so we had to dodge around its everyday business. Pendleton, to his credit, accepted their fate—he knew it was useless to go against Judge Oscar Hellerman, a judge who also handled a lot of property sales. The little gnome gave us two conference rooms, a small one for interviewing employees and a much larger one for inspecting legal documents.

Sara Bolton got other PAs organized and then joined us to suffer through her own interview. I noticed the family resemblance to George Samuelson.

“You're making a lot of extra work for us,” she said after sitting across the table from us. “I don't know what you expect to find. This firm is a well-established and reputable one, founded right after the war, in fact, decades ago.”

I shrugged. “Thanks for helping us out. It's a murder investigation. Neither your firm nor the judge had much choice. Be quick with the documentation and answering our questions, and we'll be out of here soon. Detective Sergeant O'Toole?”

Betsy shuffled through the pile of papers that remained in her possession. I knew that was more to buy enough time for her to organize her plan of attack. “Tell us about your relationship with Sam Crenshaw.”

“I had no relationship with Sam. I thought I did once—we'd gone out a few times—but he ended it. I'm not sure why.” She laughed. “Maybe because I'm not into computer games?”

“Intra-office relationships can be complicated. Could you still work with him? The IT Department must be involved in just about everything.”

“The IT Department worries about hardware and software for the most part. The rest of us worry about legal deals between a buyer of commercial property and a seller of the same.”

“Not always simple transactions, I assume, if only because they can involve millions?”

“That's correct. Sometimes I have to organize the work of hundreds of people, the buyers', sellers', and ours. Bristol is on the move, detectives. You've probably suffered from the expansion going on just like we have.”

“Yes, expansion can bring more crime. Murders even. Does that cause friction here? Maybe add to the animosity you felt towards Sam?”

“I never said I felt animosity towards him.”

My role in that play was to watch her and make notes. Betsy would be making mental notes as well. Claiming no animosity was clearly a lie; I saw it in her eyes. Sara Bolton wouldn't be a very good poker player.

“It would be natural to feel some. I would.”

“I'm not old like you two. I'm young enough that I know some other fellow will come along. Sam wasn't the only cock scratching around the unattached hens, if you know what I mean. He probably considered himself a good catch, though, because he had a good job and looked a bit like Robert Redford in his prime.”

"Once an admirer, maybe always an admirer, but that certainly expressed some animosity towards him." Betsy shuffled her papers. "I'd like to talk about your skeet shooting now."

Sara looked a bit puzzled. "What's that got to do with Sam?"

We'd never released details about how Sam was murdered. The full PM ceremony hadn't even taken place yet, let alone the inquest, and there were many other news items available for reporters to gnaw on in and around the Bristol conurbation.

"You're quite the gun enthusiast," Betsy said. "You and George Samuelson belong to a gun club located in the same village where you both live, right?"

"So do about one hundred others, and not just from our village. I just became a full member. Before I was a junior member. Believe it or not, I find it to be a great way to get some exercise and relaxation."

"Driving around to various events?"

"No, walking a lot when you're there. You plods probably have a gun range. Most other people don't unless they join a gun club."

"Do you own a gun, Sara?"

"I own three, a shotgun for skeet-shooting, a rifle, and a handgun. I have licenses for all of them, in case you're wondering."

"How'd you get into this hobby of shooting?"

"I grew up on a farm."

"Did George have anything to do with teaching you?"

She shrugged. "Not really. He's a relative and used to be close to my father, so he often sponsored me after Papa left us." She now smiled. "He got me this position here."

"We'd like to see your gun licenses. At your convenience." She shuffled some more papers. "I assume you and Mr. Samuelson are also close?"

"He's one of Mam's four siblings. One of my many uncles. There's a few on Papa's side too."

"Did George share your animosity towards Sam?"

"I never asked him."

"But what do you think?"

"Maybe. Uncle George didn't like what Sam had done to me, and he thought Sam wasn't good enough for his stepdaughter. If you people did your jobs, you'd already know that."

"We do. I just wanted to see whether you did. That'll be all for now, Ms. Bolton."

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"What's your take on that discussion?" Betsy said to me after Sara departed.

"Lots of lying going on, and I believe she hated Sam. But enough to kill him?"

"Means and possibly motive. Could she climb that tree without a ladder?"

"That would be a bit dangerous with a loaded rifle, even for a bloke."

Betsy and I interviewed a few more employees, even two of the other partners, when George caught me in the hallway as I headed for the law office's canteen for coffee. One of the partners had amiably offered us coffee chits for our entire crew (not Pendleton, of course—probably more as a bribe of sorts than a nice and innocent gesture.)

"You'll want to see this, Detective," he said, grabbing me by my arm. "Someone's crumpled my van!"

Two of his men were loading boxes of legal files when we got around to the back where the lorry was parked.

"I'm to return these files today to a client 'cause the deal's done. But look here."

Standing on my tiptoes, I was able to run my hand over the left front fender. It was dented and rippled; paint was gone and what remained was mostly chipped.

"How long have you been using this van?"

"More than a week. I knew this job and others were coming up, so I just parked the old wreck in my own drive. Someone took it for a joyride, Sergeant."

"Or used it for another mission," I said. Steve had never mentioned our encounter with the lorry to anyone outside our team, especially not to George. "But why show me?"

"Don't you plods do stolen vehicles anymore?"

"Transit Police usually take care of them. And this van wasn't stolen because they returned it to you later."

"Um, people shouldn't be able to nick a lorry even for a bit and get away with it."

"Nicked, borrowed, stolen—whatever it was, Transit's what you want." But I considered the situation a moment more. "How long was the lorry missing? What time and days?"

"To be honest, I never noticed it missing. I often park lorries at my place. Saves on the feekin' paperwork."

"Understood. Answer my question."

He did. He'd leased it using the firm's credit card the night Sam died, but I was thinking that the damage was done when the van hit our police car! I remembered Steve's words: "That was intentional, Owen!"

"Let me snap some pics of the damage done with my moby, George. You should do the same for the leasing agency. And thanks for calling my attention to it."

"Bugger that! The leasing agency is going to charge me. Can you at least say sumpin' to old man Pendleton?"

"I'll even send him a copy of the pics, making it a bit more official. You still should get Transit involved. I wouldn't have high hopes about your boss doing something about it."

"He might assign one of his stooges to do sumpin'. Maybe Sara Bolton who's a big arse-kisser. And she knows about such things, having lived on a farm."

I eyed him. "Can she drive a vehicle that doesn't have automatic transmission?"

"Hell, that girl can drive complicated farm machinery as well as she can shoot a gun. Done it for me at harvest time. She's been driving heavy machinery since she could reach the pedals."

"Sounds like quite a lass, your niece," I said, smiling.

"How'd you know she's my niece?"

I lied. "She told us. We're interviewing all the firm's employees, remember?"

"Aye, I heard you plods got a warrant for the documents." He jerked a thumb towards the lorry's cargo. "Them's some you'll not be able to see."

"When did that estate deal close?"

"Um, two months ago."

"Probably not a problem then, but I'll make a note of it. We might need another warrant for whoever receives that load."

"Or warrants. For all the firms we've returned papers to recently."

## Chapter Ten

### ANPR Data

I studied the lorry as George drove away with his two helpers. I’d groaned when he’d made his last comment: Judges were stingy with warrants. But documents were one issue, whether the lorry was our attacking van another. There was a chance that Sara Bolten had taken it for the “joyride” that included an attempt to rid herself of Steve and me, but forensics evidence on and in it now would be impossible to obtain.

Yet I had an alternative. I remembered where George’s place was just off the M4 in that little enclave. There could be an ANPR camera before and after the turnoff! Would I be lucky and spot who’d borrowed the lorry from George’s drive?

I called Bets to tell her I was returning to the station to talk to the PCs who were looking at ANPR camera records, more for the scene-of-the-crime pics near the park than for Steve and my brush with death. She said that was okay and she could continue to oversee the work at the law firm.

PC Kendall was involved with the ANPR work too. I decided that I’d have to give her a “job well done” commendation in my report—she was everywhere! Besides being a hundred times better looking than male plods and ten years younger, she reminded me of myself when I was a PC just starting out.

“I’ve seen there are some ANPR datasets corresponding to cameras near residences of the firm’s employees, so I’ll just move George’s to the top of the list. What am I looking for?”

“That van that clipped the police car Steve and I were in. Before and after that happened, to be precise. Especially if anyone besides George is driving the van.”

“Understood. That will take a while, but revenge is best served cold. And I’ve just decided I need another coffee.”

“Me too. Steal some of Morgan’s. He hates the canteen’s swill.”

I left Kendall and colleagues to it—she brought me a coffee as well—and sat at my desk, trying to imagine who would dare try to kill two coppers with that van. I decided it could be anyone associated with the law firm’s business if it was to cover up illegal activity. That meant it might not have anything to do with Sam’s murder. Did we have two distinct crimes? I called Betsy.

“Anything found in the documents?”

“They’re going through Sam’s files now. There are some protected folders we can’t get into.”

I silently cursed. We should have done that right away! But again, whatever was in those folders might have nothing to do with Sam’s death. Where was Steve? I felt I needed some guidance. “Those might be important. Get Sam’s techies to help. Threaten them a bit if you must. They’re probably better for looking through the legal mumbo-jumbo anyway. Do you know where Steve is?”

She laughed. “Kanzi’s got him looking at wedding gowns.”

That made me laugh too. Were they finally going to tie the knot? “I’m sure Mother Kamichu would want to participate in that.”

“I think Kanzi’s getting her input via Zoom. Newcastle’s a bit far away for spur-of-the-moment trips to dress shops.”

“I’ll have to tell Steve that he must be careful with what he wears too. Lowri insisted that my garb had to match her father’s.”

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I spent almost an hour going over all the information we'd gathered. Everything kept pointing to two crimes: The first, Sam's murder; and the second, the attempted murder of Steve and me. George and Sara were possibly connected to both, though, but my gut feeling was that their workplace was connected in some way as well.

As happened with many cases, we had one or more jigsaw puzzles with a lot of pieces, some of them probably still missing, others extra and superfluous. PC Kendall interrupted my thoughts by rapping on the desktop next to mine.

"Sorry to break your concentration, Owen. I've got something."

"No problem, Patty. I'll just back out of this mental *cul de sac* that leads to nowhere. What do you have?"

She pulled up a chair from the desk next door and sat beside me. I sniffed and decided that her *eau de* whatever was the same as Lowri's. Not good to think about such things, Owen old boy! She smiled at me. She wouldn't chat me up in the office, though, so it wouldn't be possible to really know if she had other intentions.

"The driver of the van. At least the person who borrowed it from George's drive." She plopped a pic down on my desk.

"Sara Bolton?"

"The same. The day of the crash, just before it."

"Can we blow this up?"

Kendall plopped down another pic where she'd zoomed in on the van's driver. There was now some pixelation, but I could make out Sara's face more clearly.

"She looks very determined, doesn't she?" I looked at the time stamp. "She must have parked that lorry somewhere, used it later for her mission, and then returned it."

"Is that enough to arrest her?" Kendall seemed chuffed; she had a right to be.

"What's her motive? A lot of us have worked on this case. Killing Steve or me doesn't make it all go away."

"No, you're right. Maybe she's trying to frame her uncle?"

I liked that she was coming up with theories. I decided to go with that. "So one, her action has nothing to do with Sam's death? And two, it points to her more than George because we now see who was driving. And three, we still need a motive."

"I've heard you tell some of us that we don't always need a motive. A suspect can just be a wild nutter."

"Yes, that can occur. But we still like to look for one. It might seem crazy to us, but people have been known to murder for weird reasons...or none at all, because they just like violence."

At that moment, Steve called. I first kidded him about coordinating wedding apparel with Kanzi's father and then told him about Patty's discovery.

"I'll call Betsy," Steve said, "and ask her to take Sara to the station for more interrogation. You and I can watch Bets and Patty interrogate Sara."

"Good idea. She might open up more with two female officers. Should I send someone to protect Gwen Aldred?"

There was dead silence for a moment as Steve figured out what I was driving at, long enough that I thought I'd lost the connection.

Then he said, "If we're interrogating Sara, she won't be able to do anything to Gwen. Good point, though. She might be going down a list. Can't yet see why we'd be on it."



"To slow down the team's progress on the case?"

"Maybe. See you at the station."

But Steve's plan never even got started: Sara had disappeared.

SAMPLE

## Chapter Eleven

### Nicking the Murderer

Steve ordered an all-points, and I agreed to meet him at Gwen's workplace, a daycare center not far from the station.

When I pulled up beside Steve's car, he pointed at a small orange mini. "That's Sara's. I confirmed the plate number. She's already here. We'll have to be careful, Owen. There are usually twenty to thirty little ones here on any given day."

"How do you know this?"

He looked a bit sheepish. "Kanzi's been looking at daycare centers for future reference. Keep that to yourself."

"I see." I really didn't understand, at least not completely, but I didn't want to waste time discussing it. "How do you want to approach this?"

"I've called for an ARU. I don't want to see this turn into a mass shooting. Sara might not even have any of her guns with her, but she knows how to use them if she does. Do you have your vest?"

"In the boot."

"Get it and put it on. I've already got mine on. I have my old patrol officer's baton too. Not much protection against a gun, but it's something. I'm not waiting for the ARU. They'll be well-armed, but maybe we can talk Sara out of resisting."

I digested that. It made sense. With bullets flying around, children could get hurt. "Flip for the front?"

"No. I'll take the front. You cover the back. Don't let anyone see you until I'm in."

The daycare center was a small house with a large backyard they'd turned into a small playground. It had an alleyway behind that where garbage bins were picked up. By the center's bins a car was parked. I ran the plate on my moby. It belonged to George Samuelson. Did that mean we'd be facing two crazy people with guns?

I kept out of sight, following Steve's orders, but I could hear angry voices from inside the house as I stood behind some bushes near the rear porch. First came the sound of a doorbell playing some parody of a circus tune; that would be Steve. After a moment, there came Steve's more insistent knock and an insistent plea.

"Open up, Sara. You don't want to hurt any of those children!"

A man's voice said, "Sara's gone!" It sounded like George Samuelson. Did Steve recognize the voice.

It had surprised me when he'd said that Sara was gone. How? Her car was still in front. Could she have slipped by us some way on foot?

"I'm sorry, George, but I must verify that. Open the door. Let's settle this peacefully. An ARU is on the way, but I prefer to avoid using their firepower."

"You can go to hell, Inspector Morgan." That was Sara's voice. George had lied for his niece.

I then heard two shots. I readied my baton and broke the backdoor in. I ran from the kitchen, through the dining room and into the entrance hallway, barely glancing at the cowering Gwen and her colleagues who were trying to protect the children.

Steve was just inside the entrance door. George was holding a gun. Sara was on the floor, her head resting in a pool of blood. I assumed she was dead.

“I discovered she took the lorry,” George said after dropping the gun and holding out his hands for us to put the cuffs on. “She shot Sam, officers. She was going to shoot my Gwen too. I couldn’t let that happen.”

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## Chapter Twelve

### End Game

None of us believed it was all over because we didn't believe Sara's losing Sam to Gwen was enough to send her over the edge.

After a briefing back at the station where Steve and I gave a post-mortem (literally!) report about what had just occurred—George Samuelson was now in a cell in the basement—Betsy came forward with a bomb.

“We have discovered Sara's main motive.”

Steve and I sat down with the others. “You have the floor, Sergeant. I assume that what you have relates to the law firm somehow?”

“Nothing involving any employees other than Sam, Sara, and Pendleton and another partner. Sam discovered something that got him killed. It wasn't just his rejection of Sara and her jealousy of Gwen. Sara jumped at the opportunity to become a very rich young woman by killing Sam, independently of her jealousy.” Betsy waved a few sheets of paper. “The firm's own IT team, Sam's colleagues, broke into his file folders. Sam had discovered that Pendleton and that other partner had taken bribes from both sellers and buyers of some commercial properties to lower the price of the transaction for tax purposes. A percentage of that difference and a portion of the bribes Pendleton and the partner would have been shared with Sara if she prevented Sam from exposing the crimes. Pendleton approached her, convinced her, and she did it.”

DCI Mark Hunter jumped to his feet. “I hope we're arresting those two solicitors!”

Betsy made a little salute to him. “Yes sir! They'll soon give George company in their very own cells.”

Everyone laughed, even Mark.

All that was left was clean-up. That would take a while. We had three cases to prepare for the Crown Prosecution Service. George's would be for manslaughter. We felt he'd at least considered the danger the women and children in the daycare center had experienced, although none had been hurt. Protection of Gwen would also be a plus. He might get off easy. The two solicitors' charges would be more complicated. They'd never practice law again, of course, but they'd also spend a long time in jail, how long not clear. Mark and Steve wanted to make a case for accessory to murder in addition to the obvious fraud charges.

Part of the clean-up went beyond the Avon and Somerset Constabulary's purview: One of the sellers and property owners in the estate deal was the owner of the farmland Sam's father had leased for farming. We weren't sure who would prosecute that toff or how much he knew about the fraud—investment groups are hard even for a city's legal system to prosecute alone—so we passed his part of the case on to the Foreign Secretary's office where the bloke worked. Other sellers were suspects as well, but evidence for their personal involvement was scarce. Pendleton and his partner could have been mostly acting alone.

Gwen was another matter. Clearly her stepfather had mixed emotions about his stepdaughter, just from what we'd learned. There would be no charges against her, of course, but I'd promised myself to get her some professional help. The whole case, Sam's death, our investigation, and, most of all, what had occurred in the daycare center, had left her distraught and afraid of her own shadow. I decided to recruit her stepfather to help me encourage her to get help. She had a whole life remaining to live and needed to get on with it.

## **Memories of East Berlin**

### **Summary**

Esther Brookstone takes an art course in Berlin with Philippa Bernard. An old nemesis from her MI6 past spent there recognizes her.

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### **Cast of Principal Characters**

Bastiann van Coevorden—Dutch MI5 consultant and ex-Interpol agent

Esther Brookstone aka Anna Hausmann —ex-Scotland Yard inspector and ex-MI6 agent

Harold “Hal” Leonard—American MI5 consultant and ex-Interpol agent

Philippa Bernard—DGSI agent and ex-DGSE agent

Wolfgang Albrecht aka Andros Christopolous—ex-Stasi agent and current professor

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## Chapter One

### London, England

“Of course you must go, Luv,” Bastiann van Coevorden said to his wife Esther Brookstone when she told him about the invitation to the course. “Hal and I will be ensconced in our own awful forensics course, bored to tears, so why shouldn’t you and Philippa suffer that fate as well?” Calling upon his detecting skills, the ex-Interpol agent could see some hesitation beyond her frown. “Except you might not be bored, right? One might expect that you’ll see that watercolors course as an interesting challenge. It’ll be completely different from your restoration work at your gallery, I dare say.”

“That’s very perceptive of you, Luv. Doing good restoration work requires and builds on knowledge of oil painting techniques. But I haven’t done watercolors since my father forced me to try it donkey’s years ago. You can understand how that made a fifteen-year-old hate that medium. That course in Berlin will be a challenge for me in many ways, but one will be the chance for me to get beyond a childhood prejudice.” *He’s probably wondering why his old wife would worry about such things! He didn’t know my father!* “Can I assume then that Hal and you won’t feel abandoned if Philippa and I are off cavorting in Berlin?”

Philippa Bernard, Hal Leonard’s girlfriend, had seen the course offering in an online list and signed up for it. She’d then convinced Esther to apply as well. The course fees were reasonable, but both women would have to add them onto their travel and housing costs. That was less of a problem for Esther than Philippa, but both thought the course would be fun and keep them busy as their significant others wasted their own precious holiday time playing at being MI5 CSIs.

“Philippa and Hal lead lives like we had once, Luv,” Bastiann said. “A long-distance love affair. He’s alone a lot here in London, so he knows most of the good establishments where one can have a good drink and meal. Or we can just drink, eat takeout, and otherwise hang out in our new house. We’ll be fine.”

He eyed her with eyebrows raised as he twirled his Poirot-style mustache. *A sure sign of concern, she thought. He thinks I might get into trouble!*

“Any weird feelings about returning to Berlin?” he said.

Esther was the senior member of the duo, being the Butch Cassidy to Philippa’s Sundance Kid. Once she’d been a Scotland Yard Inspector in the arcane Art and Antiques Division—director of it for a time, in fact—but she’d much earlier entered government service as a Cold War spy for MI6 serving in East Berlin. She was now supposedly retired and the proud owner of a West Side art gallery, but she’d managed to get into several dangerous situations even after retirement. As Bastiann and others would say, she either found trouble, or it found her.

Esther had first met Philippa briefly at her wedding near Lyon when she’d married Bastiann. At the time, Bastiann and Hal were both Interpol agents, and Hal had been Bastiann’s best man who’d succumbed to Philippa’s charms. Bastiann knew the French woman well because he’d worked with her when she was a DGSE agent; in fact, during a gun battle, he’d once saved her life. She now worked for DCSI. Esther hardly knew her, though. Even at the wedding reception, Hal had spent most of his time with her, and Esther fully expected there’d be a wedding in that pair’s future.

Bastiann, of course, knew about Esther’s time spent in East Germany during the Cold War but not much about the details. Although Esther had never given him any about what she’d done in MI6 because she legally couldn’t, she’d explained to him, for example, a bit of the

history involving her piano, the one she'd lost when a domestic terrorist had bombed their building. That was why he called their current home "our new house" when it wasn't new at all. *Perhaps he's worried about me reliving some of the dangers I faced in East Berlin?* One very real one was associated with that piano!

"Pish-tosh, Luv. Now one hardly knows there was once an East and West Berlin after all the new construction. What's still obvious is how much the city suffered at the end of World War Two, especially that poor church at *Breitscheidplatz* on *Kurfurstendamm*. I've been back several times after the country's unification, you know, and I hardly recognized my old haunts in East Berlin."

"Good. I won't have to warn Philippa about how you might have bouts of depression then."

"You'd have done that?"

"Just as a precaution. I want you two to enjoy your fortnight there."

"We will, don't worry. Hal and you can have your fun; we girls will have ours. For all you know, my Dutchman, there'll be some handsome young amateur artists in our course with tight bums and washboard sixpacks looking for a good time too, someone like Ricardo Silva."

Ricardo belonged to Bobbie MacDonald, and the couple was now raising new twins, both artists featured in Esther's gallery. Ricardo was a flamboyant Brazilian whose tattooed body also might be called a work of art.

"His ink would probably scare anyone but his wife, although I'll admit he could be an interesting model for a portrait painter, nose ring and all. Are there watercolor portraits of naked Brazilians?"

She smiled. "No famous ones, I'm sure. Might be interesting to try, I suppose. You must paint fast with watercolors, and you only get one chance to get it right. No do-overs like with oils. Remember that first portrait of the new king?" He nodded. "Maybe that should have been a watercolor so the reds could be seen dripping down like blood."

It was now Bastiann's turn to smile. Esther, like many Labour party voters, didn't care for the royal family, especially the new king whom Esther thought had driven his first wife to an early death so his queen could be his old love.

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Esther met Philippa at Berlin's Tegel airport, Philippa's flight from Paris's Orly landing half an hour after Esther's flight from London's Heathrow. They shared a taxi to the boarding house Philippa had recommended; she'd used it often when she'd worked for DGSE—she was now a DGSi agent, which was comparable to the UK's MI5 where Hal and Bastiann were consultants.

The *fraulein* at the boarding house's registration desk looked from one woman to the other and then at their passports. "Are these your real names?"

"No, they're aliases. We're professional assassins." The woman's eyes opened wide. "Bollocks, woman, what a question! Of course, they're our real names. Are the authorities here looking for Russian spies or some other fascist freaks?"

Esther then backed away from the desk a bit, realizing that she was in the young woman's face and the young clerk might be about to cry. And there'd been no chance she would have mistaken Esther's angry tone of voice.

Philippa glanced at the clerk, then at Esther, and broke out laughing. "You think we're related, correct?" she asked the clerk, also in perfect German.

The woman now blushed. "Like mother and daughter," she said in perfect English.



“I never!” Esther said. She then studied Philippa, slowly realizing that the young clerk had a point. “Oh my Lord! She’s right, Philippa. Right down to our comfortable pumps. Basically, the same light blue power suit too.” Esther now smiled at the clerk. “I apologize. Very perceptive of you, my dear. They say everyone has a doppelganger somewhere in the world. I guess I have a doppel-daughter. Philippa’s not my daughter, though; and I’m not her mother; but we sure as hell look like we could be mother and daughter.”

“Your hair color and hairdos are even the same,” the clerk said, probably glad that Esther’s anger at her presumed rudeness had faded away. “I’m sorry I’ve created a scene, ma’am.”

“Um, my apology trumps yours, because I was more in the wrong.” She winked at the woman. “And now quite chuffed that you thought that this lovely lady was my daughter. But are you sure you’re not a *Bundespolizei* officer looking for an SVR agent carrying an umbrella tipped with radioactive material or vials of Novichok?”

Philippa shook her head in the negative as a warning to Esther. But the clerk now willingly participated in the humorous interlude.

“No, ma’am. We might have a few guests here who are into such things—I can’t speak for them because I don’t speak Russian—and I’m just a student who works between classes. It’s usually quiet enough around here for me to study during the day because the spies are out and about.”

“Understood. I did the same thing once upon a time. Run a reception desk, that is. Our keys?”

“Of course. Sorry. Rooms 33 and 34.” She handed over two old-fashioned keys attached to plastic tags with the room numbers in large print on them. “You’ll both have a bit of a view of a nice park. Breakfast is served from seven to half past nine. There’s a loo at each end of your hall. They’re shared between the four rooms on your floor, but each room also has a small wash basin and a tiny refrigerator. You’ll find a list in your rooms indicating nearby three- to five-star restaurants. To save the planet, we only change bedding and towels once per week. I suggest you take the lift. The stairs are rather narrow and steep.”

Esther appreciated the latter advice. Philippa and she each had a small suitcase and makeup case besides their purses. “I presume there’s a fire escape up there?”

“We’ve never had a fire here, ma’am, and it’s been a non-smoking establishment for two decades. There are complete instructions on what to do if there is one, though, on the back of your entrance doors.”

“Looks like we should go up and get sorted,” Esther said to Philippa.

“Maybe we can visit the university after that? I’ve never been there.”

“An excellent idea. We can have tea once we’re there. It’s quite a charming place.”

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Esther and Philippa took the subway to the Dahlem-Dorf station and then entered the Freie Universität Berlin’s campus. Its students were in exams, so there weren’t many on campus that weren’t already tucked away somewhere cramming. Most of the ones the two women saw had their noses in textbooks and notebooks, even where they sat to have snacks or other refreshment in one of the cafeterias.

“Esther, that man over there, across the room—don’t look, but he’s studying you. Do you know him?”

In her previous job at Scotland Yard, she’d visited many universities, in England as well as abroad, more to get help from their art experts than to visit police stations to interview

suspects or arrest art criminals. She'd always been comfortable in a university setting. One of her four husbands had been an Oxford professor of art history, after all. Her marriage to him and their stay there had occurred after her work with MI6.

She made like she was checking her makeup to study her observer. "No, I don't know him, Philippa, but he does look somewhat familiar. Perhaps I'm niggling his long-term memory as well? Should I go introduce myself? Or is he also just wondering if you're my daughter?"

"I'd be proud to be your daughter," Philippa said, probably taking what Esther stated to be a cue to change the subject. "Bastiann and Hal have told me so much about you. You're famous."

"Fame has its downside. There are still copies of that damned documentary floating around, the one the BBC made without my permission. Also going far beyond Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame, to put a fine point on it."

"It's important for people to have heroes. Many agencies work in secret, so the people don't realize there are those like us who try to keep them safe."

"Um, you've made a good point, but I'm certain that's not the reason the BBC went ahead and made that documentary. And Bastiann and I probably lost a lovely flat in a lovely building because of my so-called fame. The reasons for agents to work in secret undoubtedly outweigh those for their working overtly. You of all people should know that."

"Your BBC example is more about today's media being out-of-control. You of all people should know that with all the British paparazzi always looking for their next big scandalous story."

"Um, I suppose. Any democracy needs a free press, but they can be a huge pain in the arse at times. Erm, he walks with a limp."

They both watched Esther's observer pass by as he left the cafeteria.

"Perhaps an old war wound?" Philippa said. "He's about your age."

"Not World War Two, because neither of us are that old, so some more recent and local skirmish perchance." She eyed Philippa. "You were lucky Bastiann was around, you know. Nothing but scars left, I presume?"

She demurred but then said, "Only Hal sees them now."

"And all the lady parts still are functioning, I'm guessing?" Philippa blushed. "Yes, I know, a bit too personal, but I'm acting as your surrogate mother, remember. If Hal is going to be my son-in-law, I must assure myself he'll love every bit of you. I'm a hopeless romantic, you see."

"Or you have obstetrics as a hobby. Let me assure you, Mother, that he's the one. We're just trying to figure out what could be the best time to legalize our relationship."

"Um, speaking of a mother's curiosity, you do know that Hal had a near-death experience as well, don't you? You two have so much in common, even that."

She nodded. "His scars are much worse than mine. He told me about that gunfight with the cartel members."

"Good. Secrets like that shouldn't remain secrets in a relationship." *Not that I can tell Bastiann any details about my close calls in MI6. Sometimes the Official Secrets Act can be an unwelcome straitjacket.*

## Chapter Two

### The Course Begins

The first day of the course would be only a short introduction to its content. It would be led by two young professors, one Italian, the other Spanish, both visiting academics at the Freie Universität Berlin...*and both volunteers for teaching a course that would make them some extra money, Esther thought. Their greed; our gain. Perhaps.*

The women’s gain couldn’t possibly be for their instructors’ handsome physiques, though. Giovanni, the Italian, was only a bit over five feet tall in his old canvas trainers; he looked like a young hippy version of Friar Tuck, complete with tonsure. Juan, the Spaniard, was tall and thin and sported an obnoxious little mustache and goatee, reminding Esther of cartoon versions of Don Quixote. Counter to her expectations, though, Juan was the happy-go-lucky and personable bloke while Giovanni often seemed surly and condescending. She then realized that they had the same first names if one translated them to an English one, so perhaps their behaviors had more to do with the Universe just presenting their students with a two-sided coin which they got to flip to see which students got whom. Philippa got Giovanni; Esther got Juan.

The official language of the course would be German. Since that had been announced in the online sign-up form, non-native speakers had no excuses. To welcome them all, their two professors said a few words about drawing and painting in general, which everyone probably knew, and only a bit about using watercolors, which presumably everyone wanted to learn more about. All the students then received media and easels and lockers to store them and were told to begin painting a colorful arrangement of flowers that filled a colorful vase, supposedly a quick assignment. *Maybe a test to see if we have any artistic ability and, if we do, what level of ability do we have?* Esther thought that would be appropriate, considering the students’ varied backgrounds, from amateurs like Esther and Philippa to a graphics artist, an obnoxious woman who already had a few verbal battles with Giovanni, said battles containing German swear words from both sides.

Esther and Philippa were sitting next to each other, so they could both hear each professors’ comments. Esther had begun with the vase, finding it more interesting because it seemed a bit Asian and featured something like sea creatures breathing out fire as they danced around the vase’s fat midsection. Philippa had started with the red-and-white roses of the floral arrangement, perhaps indicating a preference for flowers over sea dragons.

“You’re trying very hard to tame them, aren’t you?” Juan asked Esther when he came by to inspect her work.

“You can tilt at all the windmills you want, but I’d like to turn these creatures into cute little puppies that are all properly paper-trained so I can go on to think about the flowers.”

He burst out laughing, and she smiled. But she didn’t think he’d understood the first reference. *Or no sense of humor?*

“And what about those roses?” he said. “Must they be tamed?”

“Um, I think I’ll make them droop. The creatures’ hot breath beneath them should wilt the poor things.”

“Interesting, Mrs. Brookstone. Very interesting. Watch your drips, though.”

“It’s Ms. Brookstone, or just Esther. I’ve been married four times, but I’ve always kept my maiden name.”

*“Asi es mas practico. Ojala Usted no mate a las rosas recordando sus divorcios. Usted debe saber que ellas podrian representar el amor.”*

Esther mentally translated what he'd just whispered in Spanish. That whispering seemed to imply that the comment was just for her—she'd put Spanish as well as a few other languages, including German, of course, on her online enrollment form. In any case, he clearly expected she knew what he'd said: "That's very practical. Hopefully, you don't kill the roses remembering your divorces. You should know that they could represent love."

"Not one divorce, Juan, just a lot of bad luck. Actually, number four's still around."

He smiled, nodded, and went on to his next student.

Giovanni seemed to be more critical of Philippa's efforts. The real roses in the vase on the little stage's table clearly had drops on their petals. *Probably airplane glue*, thought Esther, now that she studied them in detail. *And not real roses?* The French woman clearly had problems painting them in any case.

"Forget the water droplets, Mademoiselle Bernard. You don't need to be so realistic. No painting should ever emulate a photograph. And use only one brush stroke for each petal, or you'll have vibrant color alternating with gray dullness."

Philippa's next petal turned out better, and Esther learned from that, thinking now about doing her own roses.

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Later, after that abbreviated first day, they'd walked more around the campus and ended up in the university cafeteria again where Esther and Philippa compared their course experiences.

"I'm hoping that the professors switch from time to time," Philippa finished. "That fat little toad is rude at best. Your Juan was at least funny sometimes."

"And a bit oblivious, I dare say. I'll admit that they seem to know watercolor techniques, though. For a first day, we learned a bit, right?"

Philippa sighed. "I suppose." She grabbed Esther's hand. "There's that fellow with the limp again!" she whispered.

Esther watched the old man pass through the cash register island with his tray, pay the woman there, and proceed to an empty table. "I believe he must work here." She took out her mobile and began to trawl on the university's site. "Andros Christopolous, Professor of Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin.' He's written several papers and a book titled *Teutonic Fiefdoms*. Seems like that might be a good scholarly tome to read if you have insomnia."

"Given all that, why do you think he's studying you? Don't look now. He's doing it again."

*Might be that damned BBC documentary!* That case of the missing Rembrandt treated in the documentary had once been international news as well because it involved ISIS terrorists, neo-Nazis, and a drug cartel. She didn't want to dredge up all that, though. "Maybe for the same reason both Giovanni and Juan were studying our cleavages? We're two busy birds who are alone and aren't accompanied by overly protective males, so we're fair game."

"No, silly, he's too far away to get a good look at our figures, and he's still ogling you. That's the correct word, right?"

"Yes, but only for figures perhaps; but no, there's nothing 'right' about that word." She took a sip of her beer. "Um, he does look a bit familiar. Perhaps it's the same for him, wondering if I'm someone he used to know." She sighed. "Or he's imagining me naked. We seem to be about the same age, as you've said, so maybe yon professor is lonely or bored with all his Teutonic fiefdoms. Why he'd be interested in the German ones when he's Greek is beyond me. Do you speak Greek, Philippa?"

"I can read it better than I can speak it. I have a minor in maths. To graduate with that, one needs to read Greek."

"Really?"

"I'm kidding, Esther. The Greek alphabet is used a lot in mathematics, though."

"Ah, of course. An inside joke to make fun of outsiders. I understand. And I suppose that Professor Christopolous's work on Teutonic fiefdoms got him a position here in Germany when he couldn't find a suitable one in Greece."

"Or he came here to be nearer his research interest?"

"Shall I embarrass him by asking?"

"Heavens no! If he was undressing you with his eyes, he might suffer a cardiac event if he thinks you caught him at it, the poor fellow!"

Esther laughed. "Maybe we could convince him to take us to a nice night club."

"That would put us in a sorry state for tomorrow's class!"

"Indeed. But I fear Mutt and Jeff will only offer us another still life to paint. I want to try a landscape."

"Mutt and Jeff?"

"They're short and tall classic cartoon characters popular in the States. Hal would know exactly what I mean. Have you been to the States?"

"No. Have you?"

"Passing through, for the most part, but Bastiann and I were visiting with the Castilblancos in New York when they bombed our building in London, so we had to return posthaste. Because of that, I'd like to go back and visit some of the art museums and see some of the sights."

"I want to see all their national parks. Hal and I had a wonderful time in the Lake District. The US has hundreds of scenic places like that."

"So does the rest of the world," Esther said, thinking of her trip to Turkey in search of St. John the Divine's tomb. "I have to wonder why we don't take better care of it all." She sighed.

"We should travel together more, Esther."

"And take the lads sometimes? In Bastiann and my case, before it's too late, I dare say. We saw a lot of interesting places when we were chasing that Rembrandt. Or when we were in Turkey."

"You'll have to tell me about all those adventures."

"Some other time. Just have patience, and by all means don't watch that damned BBC documentary. I'd never forgive you!"

"It probably doesn't dwell on the sights seen, I suppose."

"No, it's big on sensationalism and scandal and not much more. Um, that gig's finished. Let me study the professor a bit more, though, and perhaps manage to take a pic of the old boy, and then we must be on our way."

That night, when a car passing by the boardinghouse where they were staying backfired and woke her, Esther became even more awake as she realized why Christopolous had niggled more old memories. *Could it be? If so, what should I do about it? And, if so, what might he do about me?*

### Chapter Three

#### Looking for Christopolous

Late the next morning, Philippa watched Esther rush through packing up her course materials into her locker. "Are you in a hurry to go somewhere, Esther?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I am. Are you okay returning to our boardinghouse alone?"

"Of course. But where are you off to?"

"To see Professor Christopolous. I don't think that's his real name, by the way."

"Who do you think he is, and why would he have created an alias?"

"I think he's an ex-Stasi agent who questioned me long ago when I sat on bench at a train station in East Berlin waiting to pass a gun to another MI6 agent. That happened long ago, Philippa, but I have a good memory for faces. Nowadays, not so much for names. I can't remember his real name, for example, if I ever knew it."

"So, he's a fake? How could he manage that ruse?"

"By living a few years in Greece perhaps where he was able to create a new identity for himself, maybe with the help of some old Greek communist? They're spread throughout Europe now, like flies on dog poop. I don't know who's worse, the far left or the far right."

Apparently, Philippa didn't want to get into a discussion about political extremists. "For what purpose? Unless the *Bundespolizei* have evidence, ex-Stasi agents aren't arrested or prosecuted. They were once as common as rats in the East Berlin slums, I suppose, but now I'd bet some have even become upstanding members of German society."

"And members of far-right neo-Nazi movements?"

"Um, that's not a crime either, unless crimes are actually committed."

Esther blew out a *harumph!* "I don't like young commies or neo-Nazis, or old ones, for that matter. Nuremburg didn't get all the latter bastards, and Putin showed that communist ideology, i.e., that 'workers should rule,' was complete fascist hypocrisy as well, Philippa. Communism is a debunked ideology. Tonight, I'll tell you the complete tale involving that missing Rembrandt and maybe a few other nasty close-calls I've had. Right now, I don't have the time."

"I want to go with you to see Christopolous. May I?"

Esther demurred a moment. "Okay, suit yourself. I'm not expecting any trouble from him, but he might do a runner, so two of us can nick him easier than one."

"We don't have any authority to nick anyone."

"Then I'll find someone who can, and you can sit on Christopolous while I do it."

"If there's evidence to be gathered, we should gather it, and then turn it over to the federal police. But if we try and can't find any, we can do nothing. Like I said, please consider the possibility that the man's become a model citizen. People change."

"Ha! You're assuming his book's legitimate scholarly research. Consider the possibility that the real Professor Christopolous is dead, the fake one found the manuscript, and published it as his own to support his alias."

Philippa nodded. "I suppose that's possible, albeit a bit paranoid on your part. When did you meet this Stasi agent? Thirty or forty years ago?"

"I'll have to think about that. I met a lot of Stasi agents when I was an MI6 spy. They were all scary bastards, to be honest, always trying to impress an innocent fraulein so they could get into her knickers."

"Meaning you?"

"Of course. And others. I sometimes used my female charm to get information, of course. Fascists are rather stupid, you see. Just consider that US president from a few years back. That bastard made the Iron Lady seem like an angel and a genius, and his Secretary of State properly labeled him, I dare say: an 'absolute moron.'"

"I believe that quote was a bit stronger than that, Esther. Hal told me about how and when it occurred. That narcissistic fool thought he knew more than his own generals at a meeting in the US Pentagon."

"For some generals, that could very well be true." Esther glanced at her watch. "Okay, we'd better be going. Pack up your things. Christopolous is just finishing a class now, his last of the day. We'll catch him at home. He lives near the university."

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They walked along a road bordered by a canal to a residential area near the university where a few professors lived. To Esther, the houses looked typically European, even a bit English, with their little gardens, front and rear. She guessed each house had two to three bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and other basic spaces, but they certainly weren't mansions. They soon arrived at Christopolous's address where all the blinds were drawn.

"Shall we knock?" Esther asked Philippa as they eyed the front door from the porch.

"He might not answer, but why not? He'll probably recognize both of us, to be honest. I was with you when he was wondering who you were."

"And he might have solved that problem now and will shoot us on sight when he opens the door."

"Don't be expecting the worst. He actually looked harmless to me."

*Harmless? Am I looking for trouble? Bastiann often says that.*

She'd been thinking about who to call if there was any trouble as they walked from the university. The most obvious person would be Kurt Geizler, a German federal police inspector. He'd even been involved in chasing down that Rembrandt...

"You two have been busy," Kurt Geizler said to Bastiann and Esther. "Let me see." He consulted his iPhone. "Destroying a drug cartel's compound in Peru, thwarting an ISIS plan to wage biological warfare in the Middle East, and warning the government in the UK about an imminent bioweapons attack on London from neo-Nazis." He frowned. "Any other plans for getting into trouble I should know about?"

Brookstone laughed at Kurt's serious expression. "Why, yes there are. I'd still like to save that painting."

"Forget about it. A security detail will accompany you to your hotel. I want you two to stay put there until we clean up your mess. Dunst has already proven he will take revenge on those who cross him. We'll find him and his friends, never fear. But that painting is irrelevant now."

"Not for me," she said...

Of course, Kurt had described the situation a bit incorrectly. It was ISIS that had planned the attack on London, and the neo-Nazis who'd destroyed the cartel's compound. More importantly to Esther, the painting was one of many being used to finance the neo-Nazis plans for a Fourth Reich; like the Gardner Museum's paintings, a heist Esther had consulted on to help the FBI and her NYPD friend Castilblanco, the painting of Rembrandt's son had never been recovered.

A more immediate problem? If she called Kurt beforehand, he would most likely tell her and Philippa to cease and desist, and, by the time the authorities took any action, the Stasi agent could be long gone.

"Knock on the feekin' door, please," Esther told Philippa.

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Christopolous opened the door a crack, a chain constraining its width. He looked over the shorter Philippa to frown at Esther. "The women from the cafeteria. What do you two want?"

Philippa stepped aside a bit so Esther could come stand beside her. "East Berlin train station, early 1980s. Do you remember?"

"That would be East Germany and behind the Iron Curtain. I'm Greek."

"You're not Greek. And you were a Stasi agent back then."

"How dare you!"

He moved to slam the door, but Esther jammed her large purse into the open space so he couldn't.

"My patience has its limits. Let us in, or we'll call the *Bundespolizei*."

He sighed, took the chain off, and opened the door wide. "If you must. You do look familiar, but the 1980s? That was so long ago. Perhaps I'm confusing you with someone, and you equally with me." This he said looking back over his shoulder as he led them to the little house's sitting room where he gestured towards an old, faded sofa and plopped into a frayed wing chair where he could face them. "I was never in East Berlin, but if you'll tell me your names, I'll try to remember where I've seen you before."

"You mean me, of course," Esther said, her hands folded in her lap as if she were Mother Teresa but her face showing her anger. "My companion here would have been in nappies."

"She's not your daughter?"

Esther and Philippa glanced at each other. Esther now laughed. "No way," she said. "You would have known me as Anna Hausmann, by the way."

There was a flicker of recognition, but the professor said, "I'm sorry/ That name isn't familiar. For some reason, I associate you with art. Are you an artist?"

*Has he questioned someone in the course?* She now regretted using her real name for that. "I own an art gallery in London now."

"Erm, perhaps I've seen you there? At a gallery in the West End perhaps? I have the habit of purchasing old religious paintings, pre-Renaissance and early Renaissance."

*And he then probed more into my background?* "Have you ever met *Herr* Dunst? We've had some interesting conversations about art from that period." Dunst had been the leader of that neo-Nazi group bent on creating the Fourth Reich.

Again, there'd been a flicker of recognition in his eyes, but he said, "Dunst? Um, no, can't say I know anyone with that name either. Listen to me: I think we're both mistaken about the other's identity. I feel bad about that because I was ogling you a bit in the cafeteria. You're a striking woman, and this woman I thought was your daughter is also lovely. To make amends somewhat, please allow me to show you my private art collection. I've joined a bedroom and study together to make a climate-controlled space for my paintings. I often show the collection to visitors to get conversations about art started."

*And so that they envy you owning something they can't have?* "We'd enjoy that. It would make our trip here from the university so worthwhile."

*And I might be able to remember if some of your paintings were stolen from their original owners!*



## Chapter Four

### The Gallery

Christopolous’s gallery was more like a bank vault. As he spun the dial on the combination lock and opened the massive door, Esther was thinking that normally she’d approve of someone’s safeguarding valuable art treasures in that manner, but she felt instead a bit claustrophobic as he ushered them inside.

“I find many of these art pieces worthier than more famous ones, to be honest. For the latter, fickle art connoisseurs of our world have chosen them for their A-list, which I think was often a mistake.” Somewhere in the house a phone rang. “Excuse me, ladies, but I must answer that. A dear friend and colleague from Greece is calling to set up a visit.”

He walked out of the vault. Before Esther could even become suspicious—she and Philippa were enjoying their viewing of the professor’s collection—the heavy door slammed shut.

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“*Merde*, Esther, we’re locked in!”

“Aren’t we two numpties?” Esther said after pounding on the shiny, new-looking metal of the vault’s door. “We let our guard down.”

“*C’est vrai*. He became a bit too charming. I forgot my training. But why?”

“Cause he thinks I can expose him, I suppose. And I can! I’m now certain he’s that Stasi agent I met so long ago.”

“What are we going to do? We’ll run out of air!”

“I’d bet that’s his devilish plan. He might return with a lorry, make sure we’re dead, and haul us and his precious paintings away, dumping our bodies somewhere along his escape route. But let’s calm down. Stop talking and start thinking ‘bout exit strategies.”

“This might as well be a bank vault.”

“True enough, but I prefer to be surrounded by beautiful paintings than moldy old bills any day.”

Philippa started to pace, so Esther made her sit. She was already sensing that the air was growing stale.

Even as they sat on the vault’s floor to breathe the cooler air there—at least it seemed to be cooler—Esther’s mind wandered back to when, years earlier, she’d fended off the Stasi agent and managed to deliver a gun to an MI6 colleague. She was remembering the agent better now that an adrenalin surge—*damn, that probably used up more oxygen!*—was most likely stimulating her thought processes before all went black due to oxygen deprivation. *Did I ever see the Stasi agent’s name?*

Philippa had calmed down, so Esther focused her mind on that question for a moment. And she finally remembered. *Yes! My handler told me!* That had occurred in a debriefing after the encounter and probably explained why she’d lost the association between name and face. “A dangerous man,” Sergio Moretti had said. “He likes to torture people. His name’s Wolfgang Albrecht. Be wary of him.”

She smiled. *Now let the low oxygen level allow my desperate brain to come up with a way out of here so I can tell someone about this Herr Albrecht aka Christopolous!* She sighed and glanced at Philippa again. Both women now had their mobiles out. Neither phone had any signal. She stared around the vault. *Must be shielded. Albrecht would know that, of course!*

She stared at the ceiling's air vent. *Probably a fan up there that goes on and off with the opening and closing of the door. But why would the duct be shielded as well?*

"Philippa, I think I have a solution to our problem."

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A dividing wall between bedroom and study had been eliminated, and the vault-like art gallery had been layered in. Its ceiling was lower than the outside, so there must be a crawl space above it.

"I have a Swiss army knife in my purse."

"Too bad you don't have a blow torch to go after that vault door's lock."

"I usually carry the knife, not a blow torch. Ever since I lived in Switzerland with husband number three. I regretted not having it the one time I didn't have it. Bastiann and I were held captive in the basement of a chalet near Oslo. I decided to never leave home again without it after that." Esther saw that Philippa was still puzzled, but she didn't want to waste more good air in explanation. "I think I can use it to unscrew that vent cover."

"Whatever for? Neither one of us can squeeze through that opening to get help."

"Indeed. Not even you are that thin. But I can put my mobile up there. I have a *Bundespolizei* agent on my speed dial."

Philippa stood and cupped her hands. "I can lift you."

"No need. I can reach up through the opening if we can get the cover off."

Philippa's step made from her hands was still needed so Esther could apply enough torque to the screwdriver blade of the knife. Philippa then read the phone number, and Esther punched it into the mobile. She then put the mobile on speakerphone and stretched to place the phone through the air vent. They then waited.

"*Allo, allo!* Kurt Geiszler here. Is that you, Esther?"

His voice was muffled, and there was a bit of echo produced by the metal walls of the duct, but they at least had signal.

"Yes, and unfortunately calling you in perilous circumstances once again. We're locked inside a walk-in safe, and our air is about to run out."

"What? We? Where are you? Aren't you in London? That's what the call ID says. Taking the piss, I think you English call it."

"No, I'm not kidding. It's a long story, and I don't want to waste any more of our good air telling it." She gave him the address.

"I'll send a patrol car. Don't exert yourself."

"I know: To conserve air. I have company in here, though, so hurry."

By the time Geiszler's patrolmen arrived, Esther and Philippa were down to bra and panties. As the carbon dioxide level had risen and the oxygen level had depleted, the temperature had risen as well. By the time the German federal agents drilled through the lock, Kurt was waiting outside the safe for them with hands on hips. He let two EMTs help them exit and climb onto gurneys, ready for the ambulance.

"What a sight!" Kurt complained. "Get some covers on them, you fools!"

## Chapter Five

### At a Berlin Hospital

Kurt later came to visit them as they recovered in a shared hospital room, oxygen feeds lodged in both their noses.

“Can you talk, my lovelies?” They both nodded. “Good. I’m still waiting for an explanation. Couldn’t be a double suicide attempt even if you’d turned into lesbians. I’m surprised at you, Philippa, letting Esther lead you into danger like that.”

Kurt had a quirky sense of humor at times...and not much patience with Esther. He was dressed even more casually now, and an obsequious younger agent accompanied him. “Jurgen here will take notes. Who wants to go first?”

Esther glanced at Philippa who nodded. Esther sighed. Kurt was correct: She’d caused the cock-up. She began her story, leaving out some details to hurry things along.

When she finished and Philippa nodded her agreement, Kurt said, “So, the only evidence you two have was Esther’s feeble memory of a Stasi agent long ago before the USSR collapsed?” They both nodded, Esther sheepishly. “Um, but I suppose there is enough proof the old man has something to hide if he was willing to kill you two. He’s exposed himself now, even if he’d succeeded.”

“We should question him,” Philippa said.

“Ah, Mr. Leonard’s *fraulein* speaks good German just like our Esther, but ‘we’ is two too many people. Even if my lads catch this fake professor, I don’t expect him to say anything beyond ‘no comment.’ We’ll put out an EU-wide bolo—correction: EU- and UK-wide—while we try to unravel what secrets the old boy has in his past. You two won’t participate in any of that, of course. So, what will you two do to keep out of trouble?”

“Go back to our art lessons, of course,” Esther said. Philippa nodded. “And then some dinner. I feel obligated to my stomach to make up for food missed yesterday. What does that handsome doctor say? Quite an improvement over NHS docs, I dare say.”

Kurt checked the clipboards at the end of their hospital beds. “Near as I can tell, you can be discharged. You two needed oxygen and some liquids, which you’ve had.” He shrugged. “Behave yourselves. I’m off to supervise an investigation. We’ve got old Albrecht in our sights now.”

“He might be halfway to Moscow.”

## Chapter Six

### A Farewell

“I bet you weren’t expecting to see us again,” Esther told the two art professors, Giovanni and Juan. “I assume you know what occurred?”

“We do,” Juan said. “You were lucky. Have they caught that imposter?”

“He’s disappeared, not surprisingly,” Philippa said. “There’s a European-wide manhunt going on for him. Is the university revising its hiring policies?”

Juan laughed, and Giovanni shrugged. “We’re not privy to everything going on in faculty politics,” the latter said. “We’re hoping to get full-time positions, you see, but we’ve decided that to do that, it’s best to stay out of politics for now. Although it would be more an HR failure than the Arts and Sciences faculty’s...or ours.”

“The course must go on then.”

But it didn’t...not right away. The other students were even more curious about details of what had occurred than the two professors. It seemed that Esther and Philippa were the only ones still interested in watercolors. Esther was surprised how the painting took her mind off their past ordeal.

It had been only one of many for Esther, starting with her experiences in East Berlin. She’d signed up with MI6 after Graham, husband number one, had suddenly passed on. The young woman who’d become an early widow had decided to serve her country, not caring whether that service killed her or not. Luckily, it hadn’t killed her; it had only made her stronger.

Her physical assets had served her well in East Germany; they’d attracted men as well back in the UK. That had its negatives: She’d lost two more husbands before she married Bastiann van Coevorden...with some reluctance, thinking she might be a jinx. So far, she’d been wrong about being one: Her relationship with her Dutchman was as strong as ever.

*If only he were here now to comfort me a bit!*

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After the course ended for the day—a bit later than usual, considering all the talk about their escapade—Esther and Philippa ate again in one of the university’s cafeterias, this time without any ogling from Andros Christopolous aka Wolfgang Albrecht. After tucking in and doing justice to a meat pie and an excellent cabernet from California—she could well believe that France’s wines owed a lot to that time so long ago when California’s vintners had saved France’s vineyards—Esther leaned back in her chair and tapped the table with her right index finger.

“You know, Philippa, Kurt Geizler is ignoring something we shouldn’t allow him to ignore.”

Philippa held up a finger to her lips as she used her cabernet to help some chips go down. She then followed that with several sips of ice water. Her work had turned her into a speed-eater, something Hal had often complained about. *Or, is she just eating fast because she’s nervously reliving our time locked in that damn vault?*

She finally said, “You know, you English have a gourmet dish here in your fish and chips.”

“We have a lot of coastlines where fishing boats can go out for a fresh catch, and a lot of fish-and-chips shops to buy that catch and prepare some version of what you’re gulping down, but I wouldn’t call it ‘gourmet.’ A hearty meal maybe, depending on the fish batter and how thick and crispy the chips are. Do you want to hear about my worry?”

“I want to try to forget about what almost happened to us, dying from lack of oxygen, to be honest.”

“Air. We’d probably explode in flame if air were all oxygen. Or get the bends when we came out of that vault. Um, I’ll admit that I’m not sure what would occur.” She tapped her finger again. “Do you think that our evil professor was obsessed with his art collection?”

Philippa thought a moment. “I see your point. He’ll be returning to his house to collect his paintings, won’t he? I believe he said as much.”

“I’m not a gambler, but I believe it’s a sure bet that he’ll do exactly that. And I’m also certain that he was part of that neo-Nazi gang in some way, the one led by Dunst. Nazis, commies, Muslim terrorists, what have you—they’re all fascists. And the only good fascist is like the only good terrorist—they’re only good when they’re dead, good and dead.” She pulled out her mobile from her purse.

“Wait! You might be sending the poor inspector into a race involving wild geese.”

Esther smiled. “I believe it’s called a ‘wild goose chase.’ You probably heard that expression from Hal. I think it’s more American than English.” She smiled at her companion.

Philippa ignored Esther’s comment about her use of idioms. “I’m also thinking our evil professor could have already returned to his house and hauled away his paintings.”

“Possibly. I suppose you’re right. We should verify they’re still there before we call Geiszler. That’s easy enough to do if we can break into the house. Kurt’s techs destroyed the vault’s combination lock with their drills.”

“Won’t there be a guard posted?”

Esther shivered. “I’m guessing a guard or two wouldn’t stop *Herr* Albrecht. As for us, you can distract the guard...or guards...by chatting them up, you lovely French *mademoiselle*.”

## Chapter Seven

### A Return to the Gallery

As they walked from the train station to the professor's house, Esther almost felt she was back home in London: In that bleak night, the streetlights were in pitched battle against swirling fog that rose from a nearby canal instead of the Thames.

"Where's Kurt's guard?" Philippa whispered as they followed the concrete walk up to the house's entrance.

They both saw the police tape hanging down at one side of the front door instead of crossing it. Esther glanced at Philippa. They both expected the worst.

"Doesn't look good, does it?" Esther observed in a more normal voice. She tried the doorknob. "Unlocked, my dear Watson. Something's definitely afoot here."

They entered the dark entrance hallway and discovered the body of a federal agent. Philippa knelt, fingers searching for a carotid pulse. "He's still alive. Just unconscious and in no danger, I hope."

"No sign of serious injury either." Esther sniffed. "Possibly gassed. Hopefully, not Novichok or some other substance in Putin's mad inventory of poisonous toys. I suppose the guard would then be dead and we'd be dying, if that's what it was. I'll call Kurt." Geiszler's phone went to voice mail; she left a brief but complete message. "I guess it's up to us, *Liebchen*. Let's check that vault."

It was open but the heavy steel door was still shut. As they'd expected, the combination lock had been destroyed by the federal agents' drilling, but the door easily opened into the vault once Esther pulled down its huge handle. She took a step inside and looked around; Philippa stayed outside. *Perhaps the residual effect from her previous experience's left her claustrophobic?*

Esther knew it had been the French agent's second near-death experience. Bastiann had saved her life in Casablanca, but she'd suffered some serious injuries there all the same. Esther suspected that she felt closer to Bastiann than Esther for that reason, although their unusual quartet were all good friends.

Esther made a mental inventory, helped by seeing no empty spaces or hooks for missing paintings. "I believe all the pieces are still here."

"That's because my lorry hasn't yet arrived, Ms. Brookstone."

Esther recognized the voice. She slowly turned to see Christopolous aka Albrecht covering Philippa with a nasty-looking Ruger, the French woman's eyes wide and shaking her head as if to tell Esther not to try anything. *Or is she angrier with herself than afraid because she'd let her guard down again? That's my fault as well. We'd both seen that the wanker had been there because the guard had been attacked!*

"Congratulations," the false professor said. "You've analyzed me and my motives quite well. I returned for my lovely paintings once I knew the police were essentially finished here inspecting my house."

"Correction: Federal police. And I've called them yet again."

"Before I kill you, please tell me how you managed to do that the first time. This vault is impervious to both sound waves and EM radiation. Yet somehow you managed to make a phone call. Speaking of which, please hand over your mobile."

Esther blinked twice at Philippa, who was still covered by the ex-Stasi agent's weapon. The French woman gave a slight nod and flashed a thin smile, neither being seen by Albrecht.

Esther pressed her alarm app and tossed the shrieking phone around the side of Philippa towards their captor. It was the only distraction the DSGI agent needed.

In a blur of motion, she attacked Albrecht. They’d now changed places; she’d become his captor. He was on the floor, holding his broken arm and writhing in pain, the Ruger far out of reach.

Esther knelt and removed the man’s belt, using it to bind his arms, not worrying too much about the wounded one.

“Get the gun, Philippa. We might need it if the arses driving his lorry are also armed.”

Fortunately, the two thugs in the lorry arrived at the same time as the federal police.

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Kurt Geiszler looked sheepish after Esther politely pointed out his cock-up and wrote it off to his approaching old age.

“*Ja*, I should have realized he might return for his damn paintings. Nothing to do with my advancing age!”

“Actually, those paintings are quite the little gems. Their artists were quite prolific, like many pre-Renaissance and Renaissance painters. I’ve even featured some of them in my art gallery. *Herr* Professor Christopolous knew that. He didn’t survive as long as he did by being stupid, Kurt.”

“I understand. At least he didn’t kill Fritz. My agent will just have a very bad headache.”

“And have to suffer some embarrassment, a lesson for the lad.”

“And you gave Albrecht a second chance at Esther and me,” Philippa said, adding her own bit of scolding.

“*Mademoiselle* Bernard, you and Esther didn’t have to come here to this house again. In fact, why would you, considering what occurred that first time?”

“You must admit my gut instincts were better than yours, old fellow. But, in your defense, you didn’t meet the professor’s younger version there in East Berlin.”

Philippa wasn’t ready to let Kurt off that easily either. “I hope you tell *Freie Universität* Berlin that they’d better do better background checks when they hire a professor.”

“I mentioned something like that the first time I saved you two.”

“Um, I believe we saved ourselves both times,” Esther countered. “The second time, I fortunately remembered that Philippa is a martial arts expert. Hal once told me she could kill an opponent with her bare hands if needs be. Once she got past the idea that Albrecht could lock us up easily enough in the vault again—”

“I didn’t get past that. He could have jammed the handle, Esther.”

“You’re right. I didn’t think of that. Anyroad, I knew you could take that old man, even though he had that Ruger jammed against your backbone. I only needed to distract him a bit.”

Kurt winked at Philippa. “And your speed, *Mademoiselle*. Your reactions against an old man’s.”

“Yes, he’s my age or older,” Esther said.

“What will happen to him now?” Philippa said.

“It’s not illegal to be ex-Stasi as long as he didn’t commit some other crime. But attempted murder is a federal crime.”

“Ours, you mean?”

“*Ja*, twice, to put a fine point on it. And the attack on Fritz. He’ll die in jail for his crimes.”

Esther sighed. “Imagine, that time in East Berlin, I found the bloke to be a bit attractive. And he does have some artistic sensibilities like that neo-Nazi Dunst and his half-sister.”

“As if no one admiring paintings of saints with halos could commit murder,” Kurt said.

“Point taken. And consider the biggest mass murderer in history: Quite a few of the paintings stolen by the Nazis were destined for Hitler’s Museum in Linz. Adolf Hitler loved art and even thought he was an artist.” Esther eyed Kurt. “Different compartments of the criminal mind, one for art, the other for crime?”

“As you very well know, they’re often mixed by networks of art thieves. Don’t go down that *cul de sac* where loving art seems to justify horrible actions.”

“I shan’t, Inspector. But now for another emergency: I’m a bit peckish. We didn’t have dessert at the cafeteria, Philippa.”

She hooked her arm into Kurt’s. “I’m certain this gallant inspector will rectify the situation.”

He offered the other arm to Esther. “Gladly, if you two promise to call Bastiann and Hal. I called them to tell them about your first brushes with death. You should now tell them you’re okay after your second round with Albrecht and will be home soon.”

“After we finish our art course,” Esther said.

Philippa only nodded and smiled at Esther.



### Note from Steve

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

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 Defanging the Red Dragon\*

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 Rembrandt’s Angel  
 Son of Thunder  
 Death on the Danube  
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 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!

\*\*A novella that’s a free PDF download

\*\*\*Another novel that’s a free PDF download

*“Inspector Steve Morgan”*

Legacy of Evil  
Cult of Evil  
Fear the Asian Evil  
Revenge at Last\*

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\*\*

\*Another novella that’s a free PDF download

\*\*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

Mind Games

Origins: The Denisovan Trilogy, Book One

**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\*

Pasodobles in a Quantum Stringscape, Volume Three\*

Dr. Carlos Chief Medical Officer\*

Two Sci-Fi Novellas\*

The Art Forgers\*

Your Past Will Find You\*

Whistleblower\*

Murder, Mayhem, and Music\*

Crime, Mystery, and Thrills\*

The Phantom Harvester\*

Sleuthing, British-Style

Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Two\*

Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Three\*

Six Detectives, Six Cases\*

The Detectives\*

The Detectives, Volume Two\*

The Detectives, Volume Three\*

This Bee Can Really Sting! \*

Murder Upriver: This Bee Can Really Sting!, Volume Two\*

Castilblanco Redux Plus Two\*

\*More free PDF downloads; all others are ebooks.

**Non-Fiction...**

Writing Fiction, Rev. 11

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

### Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

My main motivation for writing fiction has never been to make the almighty buck. Rather, it’s the same one I have for reading fiction: Personal entertainment. Call me old-fashioned, but computer games; bad dramas, on streaming video and television; and el-stinko plot-empty, stunt crazy Hollywood productions just aren’t as satisfying as written stories.

I have almost as much fun writing fiction as reading it, maybe more. While self-publishing (lately with Draft2Digital/Smashword exclusively) lets me be in charge of my own destiny as an author, these free downloadable PDFs allow me to enjoy absolute freedom in my storytelling to explore, innovate, and, above all, return to short fiction writing. All three novellas (or are they very long short stories?) contained in this free PDF download are explorations of characters, most of them old friends from my novels, and of situations, some new to these old characters.

The main novella “Revenge at Last” is noteworthy because it failed to become the fourth volume of the “Inspector Steve Morgan” series. I guess I’m not quite ready to run that marathon of writing a novel again. (Perhaps one day I’ll make it into a novel?)

I once thought I was finished with Inspector Steve Morgan and his team when I finished the trilogy that bears his name. (There’s an introduction to that trilogy of sorts in the eighth Esther Brookstone novel, *The Klimt Connection*, focusing on when he transferred to the Avon and Somerset Constabulary, aka Bristol PD.) And having covered both China and Russia in that trilogy (as well as a Waco-style cult), I stopped thinking about Steve Morgan and his friends for a while.

After finishing the novella that’s a prequel to the Brookstone series, “Esther Brookstone and the Art Forgers,” though, Steve and friends began saying to me, “At least you should give us a novella too.” In response, I actually began to think about a fourth novel, but as you see here, I failed. I have several ideas I didn’t pursue here but could be added to this novella to make it into a novel—call them parallel stories, if you will—all of them concerning loose threads left dangling in the trilogy. There’s still a gap between Kalinin in *Fear the Asian Evil* and Kalinin in *Full Medical* that’s only partially filled by “The Phantom Harvester” and *The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan*. There’s also the question mentioned in the epilogue here about whether Freddie March’s assassin and the people who unleashed him to go after the duke and his duchess will go unpunished, but that’s perhaps another China story.

I’m satisfied with the way things turned out in these novellas, though. In fact, these last two major novellas (longer than my others, I believe) both contain good news: Esther’s is about returning a famous painting to its rightful owner, an old Jewish bloke, albeit in a round-about way; and Steve’s in a way is about celebrating Kanzi and his approaching wedding and the start of a family, maybe a celebration that’s a bit muted considering Mark Hunter’s search for revenge against the person who prematurely ended Mark’s own conjugal bliss so long ago.

Adjustments to a “new boss” are common enough problems even in civilian institutions, so they’re ubiquitous in fiction. In the “Inspector Steve Morgan” trilogy, and even starting with its “prequel” found in *The Klimt Connection*, Steve had to adjust to DCI Harry Bond, a new boss for him. Here, in the first novella of this collection, he and his team are adjusting to Harry’s replacement, Mark Hunter. I would have expanded on that adjustment a bit if this were a novel for the simple reason that rigid hierarchies, however and wherever they occur, can lead to interesting story elements; they’re much more complex today than they were in a simple social structure like an ancient tribe that is a little fiefdom with its succession of chiefs that takes place.

I assumed here the 2013 mods to British policing must have upset a few apple carts in the UK, but maybe not as much as in the shake-up in the US after 9/11.

The bonus novellas, involving Owen Wilson in the first and Esther Brookstone in the second, are pure experiments. In the first one, I was wondering if I should again try a first-person story. (A few of my novels are written in first-person, or as a mixture of first- and third-person writing.) For mystery, thriller, and crime stories, first-person has some advantages as well as negatives, so I made poor Owen into a guinea pig. (The first novels of the “Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries” and “The Last Humans Trilogy” are written entirely in first-person with a female character telling the story, so taking on the challenge of writing one with a male character was easier.)

The second bonus novella allowed me to revisit Esther Brookstone’s MI6 past as well as giving Philippa Bernard something to do beyond being Hal Leonard’s French girlfriend. I might try giving her a complete novel later—the Paris Olympics are approaching (or gone by now?)—or begin a series? (Should I connect it with Bastiann van Coevorden’s mother’s killer?) Who knows? Writing one story so often gives me ideas for more stories!

I called the other two novellas in this collection “bonus fiction” because they were afterthoughts to the main one. All three can be placed on the timeline for my fictional “future history” universe: Owen Wilson’s story obviously comes after the other stories involving Inspector Steve Morgan’s team and gives Owen a starring role to make up for Clarisse Workman’s found elsewhere (also free but in another collection); Esther and Philippa’s occurs sometime after Esther has retired for good and is dedicating most of her time to Bastiann and her gallery, while poor Philippa hasn’t had a starring role before, only cameos: firstly, as a victim in *Son of Thunder* and secondly, as Hal’s naked girlfriend sitting in a motorboat when the couple’s vacation in the Lake District is interrupted by Jeremy Brand, MI5’s counterterrorism director, wanting them to return to London. (You met Jeremy’s girlfriend in the main novella included in this collection. That relationship begins in the “Inspector Steve Morgan” trilogy.)

All three of these novellas could have easily been expanded to full novels. Maybe I’ll do that some other time when I’m up for another novelistic marathon. (LOL: An alternative could be that some young and eager writer is up to the challenge of becoming a co-author using the novellas as launch pads. Email me with your proposal and credits.) For now, though, I have other projects that I feel obligated to pursue, and they will occupy my time. (We have an election to win against the fascists of America, for example.) That’s all subject to change, of course: I’m at a stage in my writing life where I have the luxury of changing my mind on a whim! (As mostly a self-published author, I’ve had that luxury all along, I suppose, but characters like the ones in this collection can become very persistent in their demands on my writing time, not to mention how my muses, aka Irish banshees with Tasers, go after me as well!)

I’ll make my usual disclaimer here: I must confess that I have no intimate knowledge about how local policing in the UK functions and interacts with the NCA; I can only make educated guesses. I’m no Ian Fleming or British Michael Connelly with years of spy or police experience to buoy up my plots, but I’ve been an avid reader of British crime stories all my life, more so during the Covid pandemic (they saved my sanity!), and I still am; and I dare say I’m much more familiar with British law enforcement now than most Americans are with US law enforcement. If there are errors here, they’re all mine, of course, but I hope they don’t take away from your enjoyment of the tales. And, as I’ve stated before in all these end notes of my downloadable PDFs, you, the reader, can’t really complain because they’re free! (The novels are another kettle of fish, of course, but they’re inexpensive.)

Because these free PDF downloads are completely DIY, the only person who deserves an acknowledgement beyond my wonderful but anonymous readers, is my loving wife who’s been my cheerleader for many years and tolerated the more creative ones when I’ve been writing my stories. While I believe she preferred the latter to becoming a golf-widow or my continuing at my old stressful day-job until I dropped dead, I’m sure it hasn’t been easy for her to support my creative activities. Most women probably wouldn’t, but she’s not most women! She’s very special.

Steven M. Moore  
Montclair, NJ, 2024

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### About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the US and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to make a living working 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 and descriptions of his more than forty books, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com>. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.