



Volume Four

Sleuthing, British Style, Volume Four:
Three More British Crime Novellas

Collection Copyright 2024, Steven M. Moore
“The Hit-and-Run Victim,” Copyright 2024, Steven M. Moore
“Playtime in the Park,” Copyright 2024, Steven M. Moore
“The Viking’s Axe,” Copyright 2024, Steven M. Moore

All rights reserved. This free PDF download may be recopied and freely distributed to family and friends as long as the copyright is respected. It may not be sold for profit to anyone or distributed in any manner on the internet from anywhere besides the author’s website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

These novellas are entirely works of fiction. Names, characters, places, products, and events are either creations of the author’s imagination, or used as historical and venue background for the stories. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, events, locales, or products is coincidental, with a few exceptions, but all are used in a fictional or correct historical context. No endorsement or criticism is implied in mentioning them, nor are any opinions expressed by fictional characters necessarily those of the author.

Contents

The Hit-and-Run Victim
Playtime in the Park
The Viking's Axe

SAMPLE

British, Scotch, and Irish Words and Phrases

Note from Steve: Just like the US has Bostonian and Texan 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

tipple—imbibe an alcoholic beverage, or the beverage itself

tippler—habitual drinker

toe-rag—urchin

toff—aristocrat, or member of the privileged elites

tops—bobbies (for their helmets)

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

trawl—search

tuck in—more for eating than for going to bed

twaddle—nonsense

twit—foolish or stupid person

twitcher—birdwatcher

W

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

wanker—a contemptible person, scoundrel, villain

wellies—overshoes

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

wrinklies—elderly people

Y

yob—rude or aggressive person

SAMPLE

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 often 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 UK 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, Vladimir Putin's old employer

The Hit-and-Run Victim

SAMPLE

Principal Characters

Matthew Armstrong—NHS A&E doctor

Todd Crane—Morpeth PD Detective Sergeant

Doreen Hazleton—brothel owner

Earl Holiday—Morpeth PD pathologist

Reginald “Reggie the Rat” MacDonald—small-time crook

Margaret “Maggie” Olson—Morpeth PD Detective Inspector

Dev Patel—curry house owner

Richie Patel—Dev’s son

Carl Smith—transit policeman

Henry Turner—Morpeth Chief Detective Inspector

Jazzy, Mike, and Tom--farmers

Prologue

Reggie the Rat had a lot more to curse, but, as he sped along the two-lane country road, he cursed two things he had no control over, the glare of the rising sun in his eyes and his old vehicle that wouldn't give him more speed. At least the sun might dispel the Tyne's fog if he was lucky!

He barely managed to spot the bicycle rider ahead. The rider's attire was appropriate for nightriding, and the small, blinking light was the first thing Reggie saw in the mists. *But this eejit is going much too slow!* With the morning traffic heavy in the other lane, Reggie couldn't pass.

He glanced at the pistol lying beside him in the passenger seat, considered the difficult shot, but decided against taking it. Instead, he ran the bastard down.

He sped on, laughing as he left his victim behind. *Quick thinking, old man! You've still got it!*

Chapter One

“You were on call,” Carl said to Maggie with a smile.

“That’s not a sufficient reason,” she said. “During winter on the east coast, not much occurs outside the major population areas beyond transit’s purview—you’re supposed to take care of the cases of local drivers who are bloated or stoned on drugs—so did you just want to see my sleepy face here, knowing that I was on call?”

“And such a lovely face it is, hen,” Carl said. “All blurry- and red-eyed and without makeup. It could be worse if you came in curlers, I suppose.”

She smiled. Carl Smith was a distant relative, third cousin via someone Maggie couldn’t remember; she had a big family! Everyone in the area was either family or knew family. Knew her specifically from media coverage, whose good words about her were often less remembered than the bad ones. One reporter, Carl’s older brother, hadn’t exactly called her a wild bitch to avoid libel and slander, but that was his implication often enough.

“I need a better reason than that, or I’ll return home to my comfy bed. I see nothing here beyond a tragic transit accident.”

Carl shrugged. “I say it’s a hit-and-run, and Doc Holiday says it’s a suspicious death. He told me to give you a call.”

“Oh, bless his ugly soul!” Earl Holiday was an old uncle on her mother’s side. He had the reputation of being a surly bastard, but she knew that he really had a soft heart. “Why was he called?” She’d already guessed the answer to her question.

“We originally thought the victim was dead.”

Better safe than sorry, she thought. “Male or female?”

“Male. In a sense, the ambulance is taking him to work. He works in the nearest A&E.”

“An ER doctor?” Carl nodded. “Tentative diagnosis?”

“Concussion, possible broken ribs. Doc said he’s in surprisingly good shape, considering. The driver never stopped, but he was thrown aside. Otherwise, he’d have been run over.”

“Biking on this road must be dangerous.” She looked around and made a decision. “I’ll give Uncle Earl my regards and then go to the hospital to interview the victim. Do I have a name for him?”

“Matthew Armstrong. Not from around here, by the way.”

“Originally. Now he’s our problem, though.”

“Yours, not mine. Unless you clear the case as being just a bad accident. There was fog mixed with sun, Maggie.”

She eyed the road. The sun was higher now and the fog mostly dissipated. “Happened about an hour ago then. Send me your report, Carl. I’m thinking the case will be a waste of my time, but I’ve got nothing better to do right now that I’m up and about.”

In an A&E temporary holding bay, Maggie found Matthew in boxers dressing himself. She admired his well-built body for only a moment, and then introduced herself.

“Excuse me, Inspector Olson,” he said, “but why are you here? Isn’t my accident a transit police problem?”

“Hit-and-run is a crime.”

“But not a serious crime, at least not serious enough to call in a detective inspector. Or was the driver who hit me a felonious bank robber or something like that?”

“We have no idea who the driver is, or what car he was driving. But the pathologist at the scene, there because everyone thought you might be dead, says it was no accident. The transit police also said the driver speeded up to hit you.” She’d just received that information. She saw no reason to keep it from the victim.

“Are you stating that I was his target?”

“TBD. What can you tell me about the incident?”

“I only saw the driver for a second as he passed by. In fact, just before I hit the tarmac at the road’s side. I don’t remember too much after that, to be honest.”

“You wouldn’t, not after a concussion. Do you remember anything more from before?”

“The wanker glanced back. He was grinning, almost a leer, like he’d enjoyed running me down. Sunken cheeks, narrow eyes, and long hair, as if he was a drugged-out old rock singer or hippy from the sixties. That’s all I have for you.”

She’d been busy taking notes on her mobile but now stopped to ask, “And the car?”

“Older model BMW or Mercedes, black, a few dents and some paint missing. License plate ending in 95.”

“Brilliant. How did you ever manage to remember that much of the plate number?”

“Just before I hit the pavement, I saw it. It’s the year I was born.”

She smiled. *Useful information.* “Have they discharged you?”

“I discharged myself. I work here. Most people don’t ride their bikes to work if they have one, but I ride mine when the weather’s tolerable.”

“I suppose fog is better than rain.”

“I use a bike light. Bad means pounding rain or snow, sleet, and ice. I manage more biking than most, I suppose. Some days it’s the only exercise I get.”

She watched him stuff his shirt tails into his pants. She couldn’t help thinking about more intimate exercise but controlled her blush. He was in good shape for an older bloke. *Probably in better shape than I am!* She rode her bike only on days off...and if the weather was sunny and not too warm or cold. His case was also proof that drivers didn’t give bicyclists the right-of-way sometimes, something she’d also experienced, although without serious repercussions like his.

“Go home and rest, Dr. Armstrong. Later, I’d like to get a formal statement from you, including anything else you can add about the incident. One last question: Do you have any serious enemies? Local or from where you came?”

“That’s two questions, but you realized I’m not local?”

“More a Mancunian accent, not Geordie. West coast maybe?”

“Born in Manchester; lived some years in Liverpool. You go where you can find work in this economy.”

“I’d think ER doctors were more in demand than rozzers.”

He shrugged. “I balance quality of life in a locale with quality of work. And I like the coasts.”

“Maybe more history here on the east coast than west if you forget about the Beatles in Liverpool,” she said with a smile. “Keep me informed about your condition, Dr. Armstrong. Although it looks like you’ll be okay, you of all people should know that you have to take care of yourself.”

“I’ll feel better when this awful headache goes away and my side stops aching.”

“Paracetamol.”

“Dalwhinnie.”

She walked away, wondering what the latter might be—it sounded like something Scottish. But she figured the A&E would send him home with something for the pain that was a bit stronger.

She then realized her social gaffe and walked back. “Do you need a ride?”

He shrugged again. “Which way are you going?”

“North. Towards Morpeth. I live near the village of Shady Glen.”

“Near me then, but I’m across the river. Those new towers that have those inexpensive, small flats.”

“Close enough, then. I need to go home and tidy things up a bit, including myself, before I go to work. You’re welcome to come aboard the Newcastle Constabulary’s Livery Service, Dr. Armstrong.

Maggie watched Armstrong enter his building. He seemed okay. *Quite okay!* She got a few twinges in her nether region she hadn’t felt in a long time. *C’mon, old hen, he’s probably got dozens of young and pretty nurses chasing him!* But maybe he didn’t believe in work relationships?

Once inside her own flat, she put on the kettle and had a late and light breakfast. She then put on Cold Play and took a shower.

By the time she left for the nick, she felt a lot better and had put Matthew Armstrong out of mind. In fact, the first thing she did at her desk was to log onto her laptop to look for any news. That’s when she saw the bulletin from the broadsheet where Carl’s brother worked; in fact, George Smith had written it.

Like many small papers now, *The Morpeth News* had been swallowed up by a holding company that made its money from advertisements to local communities in the area. The broadsheet published its paper version on Wednesdays, but it sold a slightly more expensive subscription that included a twenty-four-hour continuous online service as well as the paper version.

George, a bit older than Carl, had written: “Assassination at a Shady Glen Sweet-Sixteen Party (Morpeth). Charles Nickles, who had attended his niece’s coming-of-age party, was shot this morning as he fetched the family’s copy of *The Newcastle Times*. The shot came from a passing motorcar. The police are investigating.”

News to me, Maggie thought. *The Times* was owned by the same media syndicate that owned *The News* and several other broadsheets; that Durham syndicate owned several media outlets up and down the east coast. Maggie knew all that because George had told her.

What she didn’t know was why she hadn’t been informed about the shooting. She called her DCI.

“I know why you’re calling. Grissom wants the case, Maggie.”

“Grissom’s based in Newcastle. You and I and my team are in Morpeth. The shooting occurred on our patch.”

DCI Henry Turner sighed. “You might want to let Grissom have the case. Do you know who Charles Nickles is?”

She thought a moment but came up with nothing. “No idea, Guv. Enlighten me.”

“He is—was—better known as Charlie Chuckles.”

She gulped. She’d never liked rozzers using nicknames for crime figures: The practice was too much a bow to those American crime stories she occasionally watched on the telly when

there was nothing better to do. It also reminded her of that scurrilous American president who worried the US and the rest of the world a few years earlier.

Charlie Chuckles was a notorious Mancunian gangster who pretended to be an import-export mogul, that being the legitimate work he'd layered over his criminal activities. Mancunian coppers and the NCA had been trying to get evidence on that job for at least a decade.

"You're saying that maybe I should stick to my hit-and-run case?"

"Um, you didn't know about Charles Nickles; I don't know about your hit-and-run. Tell me about it." She did. "I'm going to answer your earlier question now by suggesting something you might not like: Work on your hit-and-run case. Let Grissom swim in the shit of the Charlie Chuckles one. Can that work for you?"

"I guess. Grissom's probably already off to the races. He wants to make DCI, you know."

"Don't I know it. And I'm nearly ready to resign with all the hassle the Super's giving me, so maybe Grissom can have my job."

"C'mon, Henry. It can't be that bad."

"Oh, it is. I try to keep you and your team shielded from all the politics, you know. It's like being the target at an archery class."

Maggie smiled. Henry had five children. If one got a bow and arrows as a gift, the other four would all want them. She often saw how relatives and friends floundered as they tried to be responsible parents. Most of the time, she thought that being a childless cat lady was the better option. But that tug in her loins watching the handsome ER doctor dress had been hard to deny!

Chapter Two

Most team members were present in the CID area by then, so she called a meeting to sort ideas for pursuing the doctor's hit-and-run case. She was a bit distracted by the case she didn't have, though. At least Grissom hadn't called yet to gloat. She couldn't remember what Charlie Chuckles looked like, but she guessed that Matthew Armstrong looked a lot better. But was Armstrong's case the best one for her CID team? If not, she'd want to get rid of it as soon as possible and send it back to the transit police.

Ironically, both cases involved Manchester. Charlie Chuckles and Matthew Armstrong were both from there, Charlie more recently if he wasn't still a resident. The city wasn't exactly west coast, perhaps more Midlands than either coast, but the Mancunian influence tended to lean west: Liverpool, from where Armstrong came; Cardiff, the economic and political capital of Wales; Bristol, a competing port for Liverpool on the Irish Sea, but farther south; and maybe as far south as Glastonbury, where Maggie was from—all were influenced by Manchester's crime scene. That influence meant that Grissom would at least need help from Manchester PD, especially if Charlie Chuckles's murder was a turf war within his gang or with other Mancunian gangs.

Grissom is welcome to all that, she thought. Her team would have an easier case with the hit-and-run, or another case soon enough if Armstrong's turned out to be caused by a bloated bastard who hadn't even realized he'd hit someone or something despite the doctor's description of him. Armstrong had said that the car's driver had looked back. Maybe not seeing anything after staring forward into the fog and rising sun.

The meeting generated a few easily handled assignments. With Armstrong's description of the driver and the partial plate number, they'd begin the search for the car and its driver. There were some ANPR cameras along that two-lane road, most of them located at roundabouts where it crossed larger roads. They might get lucky and spot the car.

The meeting ended, late morning became early afternoon, and that dragged on, filled with questions detectives and uniforms made in their to's and fro's between their desks and tables and her office. By the time she was worn out by it all, she had a police artist's drawing of the driver based on Armstrong's general description and a grainy photo of the car.

Not much to show for a day's work, she thought. She headed home, but on the way, she ordered takeaway from her favorite curry house and stopped to pick it up. While they finished preparing her feast, she visited the upstairs loo. She was a regular customer, so the family that owned the curry house let her use that instead of the public one, which seemed always risky for a woman who had to sit on a commode even to pee.

"Hiya, Maggie!" Richie Patel, the curry house family's second-oldest son said when she exited the upstairs facility. He had a thick textbook in his hands.

"Hi yourself. Studying your rocket equations?"

Richie's father Dev had told Maggie a few weeks earlier that Richie wanted to be on the first flight to Mars.

"No, nothing that exciting. It's thermodynamics: The Carnot cycle. You don't know anything about that, do you?" There was hope in the lad's voice.

She thought about that but only for a moment. "Something about refrigerators, right?"

He smiled. "Correct. Should I care about how a refrigerator works?"

“Maybe. I don’t know. There are a lot of things we use nowadays without understanding how they work. We’re modern primitives. Just technological savages for the most part. But your father has four refrigerators and two freezers.”

“Doesn’t seem to need to know about Carnot cycles, though.”

“How did you determine that?”

“Because he doesn’t know. I asked him just like I asked you.”

She laughed. “Um, I’d probably cheat and just look it up with Google. Your textbook must have a better description.”

“My textbook is like reading Hindi.”

“You don’t read Hindi?”

“I only read English and French. I can only understand enough spoken Hindi to know when Papa’s angry with me.”

“I see. I guess you’re not going to return to the homeland to marry like your older brother.” David Patel was there now, collecting his betrothed bride.

“She was promised to him long ago. I’ve got one waiting for me too, but I’m not going to marry her.”

“Any particular reason?”

“I’ve only seen her picture. She’s okay, but I want to marry a French woman. They’re sexier and wear bikinis, not saris.”

“Um, better not say that to your Mum. At least, not yet. I’m off, young physicist, to collect my takeaway feast and run on home. Don’t wear out your brain worrying about Mr. Carnot and his cycle. He’s French too, by the way, but he probably never saw anyone in a bikini.”

Maggie was already in her car when she noticed the tag on her takeaway bag: Dr. Matthew Armstrong. She cursed and took it back to Dev. “You gave me the wrong order.”

Richie’s father examined the tag. “The doctor must have taken your order, Maggie. He’ll be upset. What you have here is extra-spicy vindaloo and vegetable samosas. I’ll have to repeat your order and his. Sorry.”

“Um, no problem. I know where he lives. I’ll drop by there and make the switch with him.”

Chapter Three

Armstrong looked surprised to see her so soon again. Maggie showed him the tag on the bag. “I have your order, Doc: Extra-spicy vindaloo and vegetable samosas. If you haven’t eaten mine, can we trade?”

He opened the door farther and made a gallant gesture inviting her inside. She almost laughed because he only had on pajama bottoms. *Maybe they’re the appropriate home attire now? Isn’t pajama Hindi?* She corrected herself. *No, you silly hen, it’s Arabic by way of Spain.*

“Since you’re here, Inspector, we might as well give each other company and eat together. I’ll set the counter up like a cafeteria’s if you’ll set the table. I have an Australian cabernet already uncorked.”

The additional food worked out well for the doctor: She always ordered too much and invariably had lots of leftovers as well, usually not a bad thing considering her hectic workdays. She even tried a few cubes of spicy lamb vindaloo but downed a half glass of ice water to put out the flames.

After they did justice to the food and drink, she leaned back in the folding chair and sighed—he’d pulled out a bridge table and two of the set’s four chairs for their feast.

“Sometimes I wish Dev Pavel wasn’t married.”

“That’s a twist on the adage.”

“The way to a woman’s heart is via her stomach? Probably more common than you think. I’m not much of a cook, if I’m honest. I do okay, given time, but rarely do I have any. Like tonight. I’m hitting my laptop as soon as I get home. Working on your case, by the way.”

“I usually hit the curry house just before they close at ten. Today was an exception. I was here—you know why—and I called the order in from here, not the hospital. Went and picked up your order by mistake. No surprise. It’s a very popular place.”

“And run by a nice family. Richie wants to marry a French woman.”

The doctor smiled. “Any particular reason?”

“Um, he says they’re sexier and wear bikinis.”

“Not during the winter in Northumberland.” He suddenly became aware of his attire. “Sorry about the pajama bottoms. I didn’t think. A bit too informal for a dinner date?”

“Understandable. Your ribs are still taped, and your place is too warm. It’d have been even worse if you’d cooked, of course.”

“Yes, it’s a bit tiny, and the landlord controls the heat. This place isn’t much more than a bedsit, but it’s got the right rent price.” He eyed her. “I’m sorry I don’t have a bikini to lend you. Not my style. But I bet you’d look good in one.”

She controlled the blush and thought about that statement. *How clever of him to turn all that into a pick-up line! In his own home, no less!* “It’s the wine making me blush,” she said. “As an import, I bet it was expensive. We make good ones now, you know. Maybe half the price? No import fees.”

“You’re talking about the ones from England’s southern vineyards?” She nodded. “It’s a rare positive from global warming for once. Southern England is now northwest France, and that will soon become arid desert.”

“I suppose. Richie might want to rethink his goals.” She glanced at her watch. “Say, Doc, I’d better get going. My laptop calls. Thanks for the dinner companionship.”

“Let’s call it a fortuitous accident that bears planned repeating.” He patted his bare chest. “Formerly or informally? That is the question.”

“We’ll see. Maybe when your ribs are healed?”

From her car, she saw him at the window. She gave him a little wave. *What a strange first date! If I can call it that.*

Maggie was smiling all the way home—smiling as she crossed over the bridge, through the round-about, and into her housing estate where her building was the oldest, tallest, and ugliest. Having dinner with an almost naked Dr. Armstrong had been an interesting experience, to say the least. He probably hadn’t looked his best, though. Her initial impression had overlooked some flaws that some women would consider obvious game-changers.

As the evening wound down, she remembered that she’d noticed them—he wasn’t Robert Redford or Paul Newman, for example. Although she didn’t watch much telly, mostly just old movies, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was one of her favorites. The stooped and tired shoulders, cuts and bruises, and two-day beard had made Armstrong look a bit too old albeit more interesting and a bit fragile. Someone needing a loving companion to help him face the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? In any case, she was willing to give him a pass on those possible flaws.

Once inside her flat, she decided that work could wait. When she logged onto her laptop, she searched for Dr. Matthew Armstrong.

When she’d mentioned Google to Richie, she’d known he’d understand she meant their “browser”—there were good competitors now. They were all just tools to search databases, in her case now for the good doctor. Richie probably had his favorites—some she wouldn’t even know about or want to know about! By the same token, she had a lot more she could access that he couldn’t. A lot of information about Matthew that wasn’t publicly available, for example.

We should have done this before! In general, knowing details about a victim might lead to a motive for the crime. In this case, no one had yet considered that the hit-and-run was a premeditated act. Instead, it had been considered just a random event: The doctor and his bicycle were on the road and in the way, so the car’s driver cleared the path as soon as possible. Simple as that!

Yet there was enough in Armstrong’s past that could have made him a target given a madman at the wheel: Disgruntled patients—his NHS reviews were mixed, ranging from glowing kudos to petty complaints about bedside manners, not unusual for an ER doctor; a bland tour in the Royal Marines, most of it spent at two English bases, precluding any chance for PTSD, thank God; and a fascination for bike-riding, powered or not, either indicating he liked to live dangerously or still thought he was a teenager—at least he’d been wearing a helmet, because otherwise he now might be in the morgue! He was creative enough that he’d help put himself through medical school by working with a cancer researcher during his specialty studies, but he’d still chosen to train for work in an ER and ended up doing just that.

None of that past indicated any situations where a person might want to kill the doctor. That reinforced her team’s idea that the hit-and-run had been a random event, a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, an awful decision made by a driver in a hurry. That led to the obvious question: Why was that driver in such a hurry?

Maybe he stole the car? Maggie studied the car’s pixelated images from the ANPR camera. It wasn’t a late model; not really a vehicle worth stealing. *Fleeing the scene of a crime?* She entered HOLMES, the police database.

The Newcastle area had been fairly quiet during the last month—not surprising, considering the bad weather. The only major crime worthy of a CID’s attention was Grissom’s

case, the murder of Charlie Chuckles. Out of curiosity, she read about it, the little bit that Grissom's team had entered into HOLMES. Her jaw dropped, and she sat back in her chair. She'd just seen where that sweet-sixteen party had been held. *Are the two crimes connected?*

It was a wild theory: Had the hit-and-run driver been in such a hurry because he'd just killed Charlie Chuckles? She shook her head. *That would be quite the coincidence if true!* It was such a wild theory that Maggie knew Grissom would scoff at it if she called him to propose it. And she could imagine many reasons for the car's driver to speed, from liquor to substance abuse to even simple anger about something that had occurred in his pathetic life. That happened all the time, especially on roads or directions on them where one didn't expect much traffic.

During some months, a lot of traffic could be on that road as tourists visited the area—hikers, twitchers, and archaeology enthusiasts, the latter because of the nearby Hadrian Wall. Tourists up and down the coast from Durham all the way up and over to Edinburgh and from east to west through the mountains and on to the Lake District. Now there would just be local traffic, a to and fro of people shopping or working in the nearby cities, even Morpeth.

She decided to keep her theory to herself for the time being, if only because she didn't need a confrontation with the irascible Grissom. She'd learned to live with the misogynist attitudes of the Constabulary's male detectives who at times seemed to be living in the Victorian Era. They considered women in the force as weak, naïve lesbos—the list of insults was long—but the worst occurred when a small group of Neanderthal males would stop talking when she passed by on her way to the car park or cafeteria. And if she were heading to Henry Turner's office, gossip would soon fly around the station that she was going to be fired.

She'd learned to live with all that and avoid it when she could. So, Grissom could wait! If she was correct, he'd never be able to close his case. If she was incorrect, she'd never live it down! She wouldn't even mention her theory to her DCI, one of the good old blokes who unfortunately had to be much more political than she was.

She'd carefully chosen her team members. The men weren't misogynists; the women weren't feminists. They were a good bunch with team spirit lifting them above the gossip and politics for the most part.

Chapter Four

Maggie turned to her office email and was pleased to find a note from Todd Crane, her DS: “Found the burned-out car shell. Belonged to someone named Reginald MacDonald. Trying to find dirt on him now. I’m going home. Call me if needed.”

Todd was a copper who’d learned to balance a healthy family life with work. He’d come to the station via the graduate entry program, but he’d never been too uppity about it and not too proud to learn from the old hands, the uniformed officers, those constables and sergeants who patrolled the streets and mixed more with the public. He was well liked by everyone. *Better than me!* she thought. She had a reputation for being a perfectionist—not a bad boss, but a leader who didn’t suffer fools.

What was implied in that email was that they could now see if MacDonald had form. *Is Dr. Armstrong just someone who got in MacDonald’s way? Or is MacDonald enough of a killer to see Armstrong and want to move him down just for the hell of it? Or is he just a dumb eejit who couldn’t drive well, admittedly in bad weather conditions.*

She soon discovered that Mr. MacDonald had form, a lengthy history as a minor player in the local crime scene compared to someone like Charlie Chuckles, who might have connections to scrotes in their area beyond innocent (or not so innocent?) relatives. Clearly, she needed to get Reginald MacDonald into an IR, with or without a solicitor, so she could interrogate him. *That means that we first have to find him!*

After the hit-and-run (and murder of Charlie Chuckles?), MacDonald might be in hiding...even on the continent or in Ireland somewhere, both just a ferry ride away. The UK itself isn’t a large country. England, Scotland, and Wales all make up just one island; Northern Ireland is part of another. There were still a lot of places to hide, though, even in the UK.

Yet Maggie and her team had to start somewhere, preferably where they’d not collide with Grissom and his team. She didn’t try to hide that worry from them, and they appreciated her honesty. Most thought it gave the hit-and-run case the flavor of a contest between them and Grissom’s crew.

Maggie felt a bit guilty for not telling Grissom about MacDonald, but that DI had the same information she had if he only had bothered to look at her team’s data on HOLMES. She’d always insisted that they keep that information as up to date as possible. Conjectures and theories weren’t allowed, of course; that was asking for trouble! So her conjecture that Armstrong’s hit-and-run might be related to Charlie Chuckles’ murder would not be on HOLMES.

Any police efficiency expert worth his salt would think Charlie Chuckles’s demise was the first event in a war between gangs, though. Yet Reginald MacDonald wasn’t a hitman if you went only by his form. The eejit was into a lot of seedy ventures, but not murder—at least, none before Charlie’s. Maggie thought that something was afoot, though, and what was really going on might lead them to where MacDonald was hiding.

One tactic she often employed for a case with a male suspect they were searching for was that suspect’s women. An old rooster like MacDonald might have a girlfriend in his past living in every major urban area, in this case from Manchester over to Morpeth and from Durham up to Dundee. They drew a small circle centered on the hit-and-run site—it included the residence where the birthday party took place, so where Charlie Chuckles was murdered and Matthew Armstrong almost died—and enlarged that circle as they eliminated girlfriends too far back in the plonker’s past, assuming they were telling local constables the truth.

Towards the Scottish border, in a little town near the national park, they hit paydirt. Todd talked to Doreen Hazleton after the village constable had chatted her up. She wasn't the brightest bulb in the chandelier because she admitted to Todd that she was still waiting for her drugs delivery from her lover. Or she just wanted some revenge for his leaving her waiting? She wasn't a user herself, she'd said, but some of her clients liked to get high as well as get it up.

"Sounds like we'd better go talk to her," Maggie told Todd. "Feel like a drive in the Northumberland countryside?"

They took the A1 to its junction with A697 and then followed country lanes to Alnham and beyond. Doreen and the bobby were waiting for them.

That fat country constable was chuffed when Maggie congratulated him on his work, and even more so that she allowed him into the tiny interrogation room to stand guard in case the dangerous Doreen tried to attack them and make her escape.

When Maggie entered the IR, she had to wonder if free shags for Reginald had counted as partial payment for his delivered drugs. Hazleton raised an eyebrow at the constable, perhaps puzzled at facing two detectives. *Or was the constable a frequent client?* Maggie almost smiled at the thought but controlled her expression.

Doreen might have once been a stunner. Now she was a bit past her expiration date. The top had informed them that the madam's establishment had become a bit shabby as well. He'd shown Maggie and Todd a picture to prove it. Maggie didn't think it looked too bad, but maybe the constable was talking about the inside?

After introductions, more for the old tape recorder than for Doreen or her duty solicitor, equally shabby and looking bored—although any lawyer in the village probably didn't charge huge fees, she probably didn't want to spend money on one, thinking hers was only a minor infraction—Maggie began her interrogation by summarizing the charges.

"Do you understand what I've said?" she said after she'd finished.

The solicitor didn't seem surprised, but Doreen looked a bit puzzled. "I don't understand. You plods never bothered me that much before? I offer a quality community service. Have for years. Gotta make a living, you know."

"The arresting officer said you admitted knowing Reginald MacDonald. How do you know him?"

Doreen smiled. *Shite, I walked right into that one*, Maggie thought. "Intimately. Oh, I know he's had other girlfriends in the area—probably still has—but he's always treated me nicely. We've been business partners a long time, with fringe benefits. I usually don't give it away free, you see, but we go way back, Reggie and me. That little rat's always a gentleman with me too. Says we're both going to retire to Spain someday."

I bet. "Does 'business partners with fringe benefits' include his providing the drugs our friend in the corner found at your establishment?"

She glared at the constable but then sighed. "We sell them to some of our clients. Part of the service, you see."

"When did you last see Reginald?"

"Call him Reggie. It's too weird to hear him called Reginald. He hated that name his old, addicted mum saddled him with."

"Okay, when did you last see Reggie?"

“Um, if I’m honest, ‘tis a bit blurry. I might have been a bit too much into my whiskey. ‘Twas just a few nights ago, I believe.” Maggie asked Doreen if it was the night after Matthew’s accident. “Might be. ‘Twas in a hurry, he was. We just had a quick shag and then he was gone.”

“Any idea about where he was going?”

“He’s got a cottage nearby. I’ve never been there. Must be on a beck or river somewhere in the area. Maybe even the Aln? He calls it his water castle.” She laughed. “Showed me a picture once. ‘Tisn’t a castle. It’s a tip lost in the middle of a feekin’ forest, it is.”

“More inland or back towards the ocean?”

“I don’t really know, Inspector. Why do you want to talk to him?”

“To eliminate him from some of our inquiries.” That wasn’t a complete lie. Arresting him for either the hit-and-run or the gangster’s murder would certainly eliminate him from their inquiries and proving him innocent would too. “Standard procedure, Doreen.”

“I’m sorry that I can’t help you then. But what about my case?”

“You’ll receive a fine and a warning for now. We found no previous form.”

“Like I said, you plods never badgered me before. Must be elections coming up or sumpin’. Them politicians promise everything to everyone and remind voters of their opponents’ sex scandals, not theirs. Haven’t seen nothin’ about one on the telly, though.”

After Doreen left in the substation’s old squad car, acting like a queen sitting in the passenger’s seat next to the constable, Maggie used her mobile—amazingly, there were four bars—and asked the home team to search the listings of taxed properties. She and Todd then went and had lunch in a charming little restaurant. It turned out to be just down the high street from Doreen’s comfort house.

Before they even finished eating, they had the address of Reggie’s cottage.

Maggie guessed that the cottage had once been the principal building of an operating farm. Through Todd’s binoculars, they could see old foundations for some outbuildings clustered around the cottage. And true to Doreen’s description, there was a stream that flowed down from some hills, passing by the property possibly on its way to the Aln.

Some of the farmland had been sold off from what must have been a large farm to either developers or neighbors wanting pastureland. If the former, they’d done nothing more with the land, but they would have the tax burden, not Reggie.

If not for its rundown condition, the cottage would seem to be an attractive place for a few summer getaways. Reggie hadn’t put any money or time into his property’s upkeep, though. What would happen to it when he went to jail? Doreen couldn’t move her brothel there, that was for sure: Her current place had looked like a lovely boarding house in comparison, at least from the outside; it was easily accessible to her local clients and ones arriving off the motorway. No client would come this far to get laid!

What has my life come to that I can see humor in this situation? MacDonald probably had a gun if he’d murdered Charlie Chuckles. Maybe more than one. Even if he hadn’t murdered the mobster, he could have guns. He might be a brainless moron, but just the hit-and-run showed him to be vicious and violent. *Maybe not with Doreen?*

Maggie knew some women conflated love with beatings: They believed their men didn’t really love them if they didn’t beat the crap out of them every once and a while. Such Neanderthal behavior and beliefs probably even predated the invention of language! It had no place in the twenty-first century.

What might be worse, though, were men like Grissom and other coppers who might subscribe to more modern opinions about relationships but still didn't want female officers in their workplace. Life was full of such contradictions too.

None of those musings turned her thoughts to Armstrong. Instead, she became focused on the problem at hand.

"However we approach this, Todd, Henry will criticize me for not calling in an ARU."

"By the time one got here, Reggie could be in Spain with Doreen, and they'd have five kids like Henry."

"So, any ideas? How do we manage to arrest Reggie if he's armed?"

Todd didn't answer her question. He instead looked through the binoculars again. "Not much sign of life. Maybe Reggie lied to Doreen?"

She nodded. "Could be. Maybe he thought she'd grass on him since he didn't deliver her drugs?" She'd been aware of a noise from the west for some time as they'd studied the cottage. She now turned towards it. "Ah, it's a tractor. Let's save us some worry and ask that driver if he's seen Reggie."

They got in the car, and Todd managed to get the Rover parked by a gate that wasn't far from the tractor. They got out and waved at the driver. After turning to start a new furrow, he stopped the machine, dismounted, and approached them. She waited patiently for him to light his pipe.

"You folks lost? The road into the park is about two miles southwest of here. Don't you have GPS? Everybody's got it these days."

They introduced themselves; everyone shook hands. "We were wondering if you'd seen the bloke who owns the next farm over," Todd said after receiving a nod from Maggie who figured the bearded old giant was probably a typical rural misogynist.

"Never seen him in me life, if I'm honest. My lawyer negotiated the rental of this here field from him. Owner could even be a woman as far as I know. People often inherit valuable land they don't appreciate and care for or don't know what the hell to do with. My older son says that there are sometimes lights in that old rundown cottage, though. That's all I have fer you, officers."

"When was that?" Maggie said.

"While ago now. Before the first snow even."

"When was that?" Todd said.

"Probably rain where you hail from. Middle of November, I reckon."

"So, the owner probably isn't here now?"

"What I said if you'd been listening."

Only implied, thought Maggie. "I guess we don't need an armed unit," she said to Todd.

"Whoa!" The farmer's eyes had opened wide when he heard the word "armed." "What's that mean? Is the person you're looking for dangerous?"

"He might have killed a businessman and tried to kill a doctor," Todd said.

Maggie had to wonder if her sergeant should have said that. *This old boy was already nervous enough.*

"Well fuck sakes, why aren't you two armed then?" He shook his head when neither detective answered. "You city plods are sure naïve. Everyone has a gun in these parts, if only to keep the foxes outta the hen houses." He pulled out his mobile, his face lost in the smoke from his pipe which he swatted away to see the phone's dial. "I'm calling my boys. We'll create a little posse, yes, we will, and go see what's what in that cottage."

“I’d rather not do that,” Maggie said. “Involving civilians in an arrest is frowned upon.”

The farmer nodded. “Okay, I get it. Feckin’ bureaucratic rules made by idiots. How ‘bout we just give you two some cover?”

“No guns?”

“No guns. If the bloke knows we’re there—the three of us have been in a few pub brawls, after all—he’ll be more likely to behave, I dare say. And he certainly won’t get away. My sons can run like the wind.”

So, the grand compromise was made: Jazzy—that was the old farmer’s nickname—and his two boys, Mike and Tom, became Maggie and Todd’s backup. She wasn’t certain that Mike and Tom didn’t have weapons hidden in the cab of their old pickup, but its gun racks were empty. She figured they only needed chaps and spurs, though, to be extras in some BBC parody of an American western. *A bit of an insult for my favorite movie*, she thought.

But the two detectives felt better about approaching the cottage to see if Reggie was inside. They had to avoid some loose boards on the front porch to peer through the dirty front windows. There still was no sign of life. Maggie tried the front door. It was unlocked.

“We don’t have a search warrant,” Todd said.

“Probable cause. We fear that Charlie Chuckles’s gang has taken its revenge.”

Todd smiled. “After you, Inspector.”

The first floor’s layout was typical: Sitting room and dining room off the kitchen, and bathroom with a shower and mud room on the far side of the back door coming into the kitchen. Maggie tried the stove and kitchen lights. Both functioned. There were dirty dishes in the sink.

“Someone’s living here,” she said.

“Could be a squatter and not Reggie. I guess—”

At that moment, the back door opened. Reggie MacDonald’s gun covered them both.

“Sloppy, sloppy,” he said. “I saw the reflected sunlight from your binoculars when I went to put the trash in the bin. I was wondering when you’d show up. You’ll live as long as it takes for you to tell me who you are, although you have the stench of plods.”

“Don’t you also want to know why we’re here?” Maggie said, trying to buy some time.

“You’re after me, so you’re either bent coppers working for Charlie’s gang, or members of the gang.”

Okay, that essentially solves Grissom’s case. “Neither one. And what about that little hit-and-run the night you killed Charlie?”

“What? You two are here for some stupid dumb fuck on a bike? Nobody would come all the way out here to nick me for that!”

There’s some truth in that. “Even if we’re plods trying to nail you for both crimes?”

“Then I’d say you’re stupid to come after me alone and without weapons.”

“We were nearby because we talked to Doreen.”

He frowned. “I suppose that old lusty witch grassed on me. I forgot her damn drugs. ‘Course, she’s got a business to run. So do I.” He waved the gun. “We’re wasting time here.”

That was when all three of them heard the tractor. Reggie laughed. “That’s just old Jazzy. When I’m downwind from that infernal machine, not even the dead could sleep because of the noise.”

“At least he’s doing honest work,” Todd said.

Reggie pistol-whipped the detective, but covered Maggie immediately. Todd had taken it and remained standing; he just wiped off a bit of blood and winked at her. He was buying time as well. It turned out they didn't need much.

"There's a fine line between courage and stupidity," Reggie said, "but you two are just plain stupid. No brains, no guns. I hate to do this 'cause there's no payday for me if I do, but—"

The tractor's crash through the cottage's back kitchen wall echoed off the mountain. Another crash sounded as Mike and Tom's pickup smashed into the sitting room. Both Jazzy's sons had rifles; Jazzy had a shotgun. They used them to cover Reggie.

"Drop the gun, Mr. MacDonald," Mike said.

Or is it Tom? Maggie wasn't sure, and it didn't much matter.

SAMPLE

Chapter Five

There was a bit of bureaucratic paperwork that Doreen's future duty solicitor James Horne helped them with—Maggie wanted the government to pay for any damage to the tractor or pickup—but soon they were heading back to Morpeth with Reginald MacDonald handcuffed and in leg irons glowering unhappily in the back seat.

She was still recovering from the long day and ride they'd had to end it. Todd looked fresher—maybe even a long day was a welcome break from his domestic duties? Neither detective looked as bad as Reggie, though, as they entered IR1; his middle name now could be Despondency. He'd been resting his head on his arms that were folded on the tabletop, not seeming to mind the dirt and grime.

"Have you had time to consult with your client?" she asked Jim. The plods knew him well. Unlike some solicitors who worked with criminals, the attorney was a fair-minded individual who believed everyone had a right to legal representation, including an eejit like Reggie. Some called Jim Toot-Your-Own-Horn, but Maggie knew he often did pro-bono work. His response to her question was a simple nod.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Reggie admitted to the hit-and-run because it corresponded to the lesser charges. "Motherfucker got in the way. I was in a hurry. I'll sign a confession if you need it."

He leaned back in his chair as if that ended the discussion. *Maybe Jim advised him to do that? Not a bad tactic to give us something to start with.*

"Thanks for clearing that up, Reggie," Maggie said. "It's on the record now, so the transcription of this interrogation will be your confession to the hit-and-run. Next item: The murder of Charles Nickles, aka Charlie Chuckles and leader of the Mancunian Maniacs, as we affectionately call his gang."

"Don't know nothin' 'bout that. Nor him. Sounds like a nightclub comedian. Does he tell good jokes?"

Maggie glanced at Todd, who winked at her. Jim had probably told his client to deny involvement in the gangster's murder, the more serious charge. And maybe that in turn had been suggested to Horne by the syndicate? She thought not, though; Jim was his own man who often worked to free innocent people who'd been jailed unfairly.

Reggie's denial made their case against him more complicated. Grissom's crew controlled the evidence associated with the murder. As far as Maggie knew, it hadn't led to Reggie, so maybe her theory was just an unusual coincidence.

They went round and round, but Reggie and his solicitor stuck to their story. Maggie's team could only hold Reggie on the hit-and-run charges. And he stuck by his lane excuse there: He'd been in a hurry to get to Doreen. *Such a romantic!*

Maggie followed the ICU nurse around that area to a hallway with a series of small offices that looked like they might have once been exam rooms. In one, she found Matthew Armstrong. After thanking the nurse, she took a seat in front of the doctor's desk.

He looked tired. His bruises were already turning from purple contusions to that sickly pale green. She couldn't tell if his ribs were still bandaged, but he was agile enough to halfway rise when he greeted her.

"What a pleasant surprise!" he said.

“I have good news for you. We have solved your hit-and-run case. The driver is now in custody.”

“That was quick. Kind of belies the nickname ‘plods,’ if I’m honest. Some teenage punk?”

“Not exactly. A lowlife with form. He was in a hurry for several reasons.”

“Was he drinking or on drugs?”

She was already tired of the case. “We have his confession. Any chance you know a Mr. Reginald MacDonald?”

“Can’t say I do. Is he Scottish?”

“Does it matter?”

“Just curious. I was jerking your chain about a teenage punk. That would be me at one time. From what I saw of the wanker—I think this is in the record—he was a gnome-like bloke who reminded me of that shapeshifter in the Harry Potter movies, the one who could turn into a rat.”

Maggie smiled. She’d avoided both the novels and the movies—she wasn’t a fan of fantasy—but Reggie had buck teeth and was wiry and short, so he had rodent-like characteristics. *Maybe I should ask him if he likes cheese?*

“You’d make a better Scot. Remember that I saw you in your underwear and pajama bottoms. You’d look good in a kilt too.”

He laughed. “But not in my ER scrubs?”

His were a dirty white, almost gray, and there was dried blood spray in a few places. “Maybe to that young nurse? Who knows? I just wanted to tell you about the case because you might be called to testify against Mr. MacDonald if he goes to trial.”

Armstrong nodded. “Will they serve chips with that?”

It was a bad joke. He knew it; she knew it. *Is he nervous? Because I said he looked good in his underwear?*

“You didn’t have to come all the way here to tell me about the case,” he added. “That’s why mobiles were invented.”

“I was passing by on my way to *The Red Lion* for dinner and a pint.”

He glanced at his watch. “I can join you in twenty minutes. I think we both deserve to celebrate.”

“Might be premature. I have to think about how to prepare the hit-and-run case for the CPS. That’s the Crown Prosecution Service.”

“I know. I’ve testified for some of their cases, everything from pub brawls to domestic disputes, shootings, and stabbings. I’ve had to face prosecutors and defense attorneys, both types of barristers often impugning both my scientific integrity and healing skills. Goes with being an ER doctor, I suppose.”

“That’s my life too, which is why I like to prepare well for the CPS. Giving them a tight case can make a difference.” She cupped her ear in a hand. “Unusually quiet. Not much action today?”

“There’s always something, but today’s nothing like Fridays or Saturdays.” He started clearing the desk. “Let me clean up a bit here—I share this desk—and make the ICU rounds one more time, and then we’ll go to *The Red Lion*. You’re driving. I don’t have a car.”

“New bike?”

He nodded. “Couldn’t repair the old one. Was getting on in years anyway. Should I keep it for evidence?”

“The SOCOs released it, so they got what they needed. I’ll go see if I can find a magazine in the waiting room that’s not from the last century.”

“You will. We got rid of all the subscriptions during Covid and by now have renewed most of them.”

At *The Red Lion* pub, Maggie had to give up trying to field questions from her team; she turned off her mobile and dropped it in her purse.

“I’m jealous,” she said, enjoying the quiet—there were only a few other customers, and she was in her favorite cubby with Armstrong sitting across from her. “You haven’t received one call.”

“First, I’m not a control freak like you. Second, we were having a quiet night at A&E anyway, as you noticed. And third, I turned off my mobile in your car because it’s now another doctor’s shift, and I’m not on call for any emergency surgeries.”

“So, if there’s a multicar accident on the motorway, someone else will have to deal with it?”

“That’s right. That’s the way it works most of the time. My workplace is probably a bit like yours in that sense.”

“Except that you don’t have to babysit some new officers who are still trying to impress me with their enthusiasm but should know better.”

“Maybe they just don’t want to screw up? And ‘the Guv said’ can be an awfully good excuse.”

“Um, those calls all corresponded to legit questions. You see, we have a bit of quandary with your case. Your hit-and-run is possibly related to another major case, so we can’t afford to ruffle any feathers.”

“A different team has the other case?”

“And a different inspector who’s a dick, at a different nick as well.”

He laughed. “So poetic. In American crime fiction, a dick could be a PI, not necessarily what’s in his pants. And then there’s ‘tricky Dick.’”

“Short for Richard?”

“Quite, but the ‘tricky’ specifies a particular person, America’s president during the Vietnam era. When he first lost to Kennedy, they said Nixon’s party was an elephant with a sore—”

“Stop! I remember. One party there has an elephant as its mascot; the other, an ass.”

“It’s probably more polite to say donkey, I’m guessing. Anyroad, the mascots make for good political cartoons, although the animal rights people over there might not be too keen about those icons.”

“Are you Conservative or Labourite?”

“Does it matter? What’s your guess?”

“Either no party affiliation or Labour.”

“Not answering. Are you Anglican or Catholic?”

“Can’t I also have the options of agnostic or atheist?”

“Okay. I’ll put them under ‘other,’ along with other religions. That covers everything.”

“Also not answering. As a Yank might say, I plead the fifth.”

He thought a moment. “Your answer might incriminate you?”

“My father was Anglican, my mother Jewish, both lapsed. So, what am I?”

“And that means nothing. Politics and religion aren’t like DNA.” He raised his glass.
“Let’s toast the successful conclusion of my hit-and-run case instead. And the king, of course.”

“So, you’re a godless monarchist?”

The food and two more pints arrived before his answer, which never came, but the to-and-fro to get to know Matthew Armstrong had made her horny as hell.

SAMPLE

Playtime in the Park

SAMPLE

Principal Characters

Ben Alderman—free-lance reporter and writer

Sally Brock—CFO of *Hercules Limited*

Ines Delgado—owner of the caravan park

Christine “Christy” Dowd—A&E nurse

Arthur Kent—CEO of *Security Systems Inc.*

Edward Stevenson—Dunford PD Detective Inspector

Tim Wells—Dunford PD Detective Sergeant

Chapter One

Christine Dowd, better known to her friends as Christy, often ate lunch in the park across the street from the hospital where she worked when the weather was good. The weather was always a gamble in the east-coast town of Dunford, though, like it was in most of England. Her other option, the nurse's lounge in her A&E section, was less appealing—gossiping with other nurses wasn't her preferred manner of rest and relaxation—but in bad weather, that was usually the better solution.

That particular afternoon, her usual park bench was the best choice considering the unusual sunny day in October. It was such a nice day that she took a bit more time, most of it just sitting and decompressing after three major ER surgeries where the attending physicians, whom many considered brilliant, had become the usual misogynist SOBs, treating her and their colleagues, including other interns and nurses in the ORs, some of them even males, as if they were indentured slaves. (Considering the miserable NHS salaries, “indentured” was an appropriate word.)

Her tuna fish sandwich made early that morning had become limp and soggy and her soda fizz-less because of her late lunch hour. (Her stomach had been rumbling during the last surgery.) She'd tossed both, and lunch became a bag of crisps and two pieces of peppermint candy she'd stolen from an old Halloween bag at home. *Here I am, a healthcare professional, eating the favorite unhealthy food items of my little patients!*

A shadow fell over her. “Could I share your bench?” an old man asked her, startling her out of her hunger-induced reverie.

She looked up. Although his face was in shadow, the old toff looked harmless enough. He wore a three-piece suit, polished shoes, silk tie, hat, and umbrella, all evidence that he was merely an old bloke out to enjoy some rare sunshine as well, despite the cool and stiff breeze off the river. So she smiled at him and nodded.

Her idyllic respite from her stressful job was then interrupted again and took a turn for the worse. A motorcyclist jumped the curb at the far side of the park opposite the hospital's and came speeding along the winding walkway, taking the curves as if he were in some serious off-road competition. As he passed their bench, he took out a gun and shot Christy's bench mate.

Ben Alderman was about to have a late lunch himself at *The Blue Knight*, his favorite Dunford pub. He'd had to go all the way to the top of the five-story car park structure, though, and walk down, so he stopped on the walkway in front of the building to cool off in the breeze off the river. He'd just loosened his tie and raised his face to the sun when the motorcyclist came down that same ramp and headed for a black car illegally parked at the curb to the right of Ben. The car's side window rolled down, allowing Ben to get a brief glimpse of both driver and passenger. The motorcyclist conferred with them, gave a nod and a wave, and took off.

Ben watched as the rider jumped the curb and entered the park. He saw the cyclist shoot the old bloke in the park. The instinctive reactions of an ex-soldier, not a reporter's, took over. He ran towards that park bench and the motorcyclist's victim.

“Help me!” Christy called to Ben as he arrived on scene.

She was kneeling by the old bloke who must still be alive because he was groaning in pain. Ben kneeled beside her and the old fellow and studied the situation for only a few seconds.

“If we can stop the bleeding now, he might survive. The bullet went all the way through his shoulder.”

“I think he fell and hit his head on the concrete too.”

“His hat would have cushioned the blow to his head a bit, but he might have a concussion.” He handed her his clean handkerchief. “Try to stop the bleeding. Tie it off if you can.”

“And what do you know about first aid?”

He ignored the question. “Don’t move his head! I’m calling nine-nine-nine. We need police, an ambulance, and SOCOs. This is a crime scene, lady.”

Chaos reigned for nearly twenty minutes more. As the ambulance drove off around the park to take the patient the short distance to the hospital, they realized they were now in the cordoned-off area surrounding the park bench. They were also in the way of the SOCOs.

Christy and Ben ducked under the tape to join the crowd of onlookers that had gathered, but a uniformed stopped them with a raised palm. “You two can’t leave. We’ll need statements from you.”

“I need to return to work,” Christy said. She glanced at her watch. “I’m already terribly late.”

“Call them,” Ben told her. “Where do you work?”

She wasn’t in scrubs or uniform—both were back in the hospital with blood on them, although it was probably dry now because the first operation had been the worse—so the annoying do-gooder couldn’t tell she was a nurse. “In the hospital on the other side of the park. I’m a nurse.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” Ben said. “And we’ll be free to go after we make our statements. Tell them that.”

She eyed him, now scowling. “And why are you giving me orders?”

“Because you seem reluctant to obey Constable Heath here.” Ben winked at the officer, and Christy saw it. “We’ll wait over on that other bench until you’re ready to take our statements, Constable.”

“That will be with one of the detectives sir. It might take a while.”

“We’ll try to be patient.”

Chapter Two

After plopping down on the new bench the constable had indicated, they finally introduced themselves to each other.

Neither Christy nor Ben were locals. Her family had moved to Dunford from Liverpool when she was six; his had moved from Southampton to Dunford when he was ten. She'd opted to study nursing and specialized in pediatrics. He'd studied languages and became a freelance journalist and occasional fiction and poetry writer. After the tension had dissipated and they'd become calmer, they both wondered if the victim would be okay.

She'd just asked him how he possessed information about gunshot wounds when they saw a bear of a man walking towards them holding up some sort of ID. That turned out to be Detective Inspector Edward Stevenson's warrant card.

"I understand you two were witnesses to the shooting?"

He reminded Christy of her Uncle Bertrand, her mother's brother. They were both big old curs with more bark than their bite, but the inspector's barks were probably more like an army watchdog's than a loyal and protective family pet. Nevertheless, she liked the inspector's smile, but she could tell that Ben wasn't impressed.

"I just have a bit of time to hear your tales of woe. You'll have to visit the station later to provide us with a more formal written statement, but let's get a start, shall we? Ladies first." The inspector was sitting on the same bench between Ben and Christy, so he turned to her. "Christine Dowd, is it?"

Christy nodded. "You can call me Christy."

"Right." He made a note on his mobile using a stylus. "You were sitting next to the victim?" Another nod. "Can you give me a quick summary of what occurred?"

He often interrupted her, especially when she tried to describe the shooter. There wasn't much she could say: The shooter wasn't a big man. He'd been dressed in black-leather biker's garb, including a light leather jacket, and his helmet had a dark-tinted faceplate. That meant that Christy could offer nothing much in the way of a description.

"What about the motorcycle?" the inspector asked.

"A Triumph." She provided the model number, color, ccs, gas tank capacity, and stated the bike had no buddy seat.

The plod's thick eyebrows raised like fuzzy, loping caterpillars. "Are you a motorcycle enthusiast?"

"My brothers were. They let me ride their cycles sometimes...or I rode without their knowing. I'm going to buy my own someday."

Ed Stevenson smiled. "They're not much fun when the weather's bad, which it is most of the year here." He consulted his mobile. "Were you able to stop the bleeding?"

"Maybe. I don't know for sure. I believe the victim will survive. They put the poor man in the ambulance right away. Ben had given me his handkerchief, so I did the best I could with it. It was a clean shoulder wound, but the poor bloke hit his head on the walkway when he fell. I think he might have a concussion."

The inspector nodded. "Being an ER nurse, Miss Dowd, you'd know that better than me. Okay, Mr. Alderman, your turn. What can you add to Miss Dowd's summary?"

"Some observations about how it all began. The cyclist was somewhere in that car park building, same place where I'd left my own car. I'd walked down the ramp all the way from the

top and was sunning myself on the walkway recovering a bit when he rode down and stopped to talk to the driver of a Jaguar illegally parked at the curb.” Ben rattled off the plate numbers of both the motorcycle and Jaguar.

“That’s very observant of you. Can you describe the three persons?”

“Only what Christy said about the bike rider. She was nearer to him than I ever was. The Jag’s driver was a bulked-up, compact fellow with heavy jowls, maybe Asian from the eyes. In fact, he reminded me of Odd-Job.” After seeing the inspector’s raised eyebrows again, Ben added, “Old 007 movie, *Goldfinger*. It’s a classic. Fleming’s novel as well. Anyroad, his boss was an old stunner, not like Auric Goldfinger. She had red hair, possibly dyed, and was bejeweled and busty.” Ben glanced at Christy and smiled. “Sorry. I noticed that because there was a jeweled pendant or necklace flashing away in her cleavage. Hard to miss and intentional, I’m guessing. I couldn’t see her face, though, and just the tips of the hair; rest ‘twas in shadows.”

“What did the Jaguar do after the shooting?”

“When I thought to look for it—Christy and I were kind of busy tending to the victim, you know—the Jag had disappeared. So had the biker, of course. I hope we managed to save that old man.”

“I’ll check on his condition for you in a bit. You just followed Miss Dowd’s lead, Mr. Alderman?”

Ben glanced at Christy, who turned red.

“I-I sorta lost it, Inspector. Ben started playing doctor, telling me what to do. I think he’s seen something like that before. I haven’t.”

“Is that true, Ben?”

“I was a medic in the Royal Marines, so yes.” He tapped his head. “Couldn’t work as a nurse like Christy, though. I was diagnosed of having PTSD and left for medical reasons.”

“So, as a medic, you were familiar with gunshot wounds and their treatment. With young soldiers, not elderly people?” The inspector flashed a smile at Christy as if to say, “Don’t feel so bad.”

“It’s more or less the same thing except that an elderly person won’t have as much stamina to recover from a gunshot like that.” Ben thought a moment. “Actually, I don’t see how the shooter could have missed. He wasn’t more than five feet away.”

“That’s easy to figure,” Christy said. “The old bloke was turning away from the biker as he shot the gun. If he’d been a bit quicker, the shooter might have missed him entirely.”

“So the victim almost reacted in time?”

“Could be. And in turning away, he lost his balance and fell.” Ben smiled at Christy. “I wasn’t that close. I didn’t move until the shot was fired.”

“Any remarks about the gun, motorcycle, or Jag?”

“I think Christy underestimated the gas tank’s size. Its knobby tires meant that it was a trail bike for off-road riding. They tend to have larger tanks because their riders wouldn’t want to run out of gas and be stranded in the middle of nowhere.” Ben cleared his throat while he considered the rest of the question. “The Jag was a 2028 model, a black four-door luxury hybrid sedan. And the gun was a nine mm Glock with a large capacity magazine. I know that because my uncle has one, not from my time in the Marines.”

“Good, good. You two are excellent witnesses, the best I’ve ever had.” The inspector stood. “Please visit our station as soon as possible—it’s about ten blocks from here just over the bridge—and edit the statements I’ll leave there for you. Feel free to cross out anything you don’t agree with and add anything else you remember that you think might be important.” He handed

each of them a card and then pointed a finger at Ben. “And I don’t want to see any of this in a broadsheet with your byline.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Three

After the inspector left them, Ben said to Christy, "I'm heading for my pub 'cause I'm a bit peckish. Want to join me?"

She smiled. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'd better get back to work. I'm a bit peckish myself, but I'll just grab some more crisps or nuts in our cafeteria."

"How 'bout a bacon roll instead? I can deliver it to you."

She now laughed. *Why is he so insistent?* "No, that's okay, Ben. I'm not going to waste away and die of hunger."

He shrugged and handed a card to her. She saw that it only had his name and number.

"No address?"

"Dunford or the world?" He saw her frown, so he told her the address. "It's a tip, but I call it home for now."

"Isn't that the caravan park over there on the other side of the river?"

"That's right. I'm one of its few year-around residents. Suits my gypsy nature."

"Aren't they mostly summer leases?"

"Aye, so they are. Gives me a lot of company in the summer, if I happen to be around."

She watched him walk away, giving her a glance over the shoulder and a little wave as he did. As she turned to go back to the hospital, she was wondering why she now felt so lonely. A little voice inside her head then said, "You like him, you fool! Admit it!"

Once back inside the A&E, she was treated as a hero even though she'd showed up late.

"We went into lockdown," Mabel White, her best friend among the ER nurses said. The black woman looked concerned. "Are you okay, Christy?"

"Serving as a witness was the tough part," she said. "There was this Inspector Stevenson who might have suspected I was an accomplice."

"Not Ed, hen. He's one of the good ones. I'll have to give him a piece of my mind!"

"No, no, it's okay. He just didn't show much compassion towards the victim, that's all. Is he here? The victim? That inspector promised to let us know about his condition, but I think he forgot."

"He's resting after surgery. They cleaned and sutured his shoulder. Wasn't a big deal 'cause it was a clean wound. When he wakes up, he'll get a head MRI. He might have a concussion. He'll be okay, though."

"I suppose the plods will be talking to him soon enough. Who would want to kill that old man."

"Maybe he's a well-known gangster? They're always fighting among themselves."

Christy thought of Ben's reference to 007. "Or he might be a retired MI6 spy who was just enjoying his retirement."

Although it was still his favorite pub, Ben had liked the older version of *The Blue Knight* better. The owner, a woman named Gwen Parker, had bought it and tried to turn it into an American-style sports bar. The result? It was neither a traditional pub nor a sports bar.

Fortunately, all the large screen tellys were off, and he could enjoy his late lunch in peace; a bacon roll and pint of ale helped him relax. While he ate and drank, he wondered how he could get around the inspector's restriction, not that the rozzar could enforce it. At one point, his hand hovered in front of his face, holding a chip with ketchup on it, as he thought, *Inspector*

Stevenson only talked about broadsheets! In fact, Ben could do everything online right there from the pub!

He pulled his laptop from his backpack and started pounding the keys like a madman. After two hours' work, he had written and edited a damned good article about the shooting. He sent it to *The Town Crier*, an ezine based in Durham. His fee was deposited into his account and the article out on the internet after waiting only the few moments that the editors needed to decide whether to buy the rights. *And I just made my month's rent with some funds left over!*

He'd been careful to keep the inspector's name out of it; Stevenson simply became "the SIO for the case." And Christy and he had become just "concerned citizens." Ben didn't have the name of the victim, so he remained "the victim, an old man." The name wouldn't have mattered, though, because Ben figured he was still in the hospital...or dead. And, of course, Ben couldn't name the Jaguar's driver and passenger either; they'd become "the mysterious femme fatale and her burly chauffeur" who the author of the article surmised contracted the hit.

He described the driver and passenger enough, though, by saying the plods would be looking for them and their hired assassin, the first as he'd done for the inspector and the second in more salacious detail, her "green eyes" a nice invention—they could have been green!

It was a scandalous piece of journalism, that much was certain, just what *The Town Crier* liked to publish, so he was proud of his work. Take that, *Dunford Daily!* He'd wasted an entire afternoon interviewing for a position at that broadsheet's HQ only to have the editor-in-chief tell him to go to journalism school. He hadn't even known there was such a thing! Some English departments had a journalism option, but he'd had enough schooling for a lifetime, probably more than that feekin' editor. In fact, he was sure of that!

And if he was honest, he didn't want to be tied down to a regular job anyroad, get married, have children, become old, be taxed to death, and die, like everyone else on the planet! Or at least the UK. Life was definitely worth living, but he'd live it his way, not the establishment's!

He spent the rest of his time at the pub working on a fiction story—it might become another novel—and a few poems. When five o'clock rolled around, he left and walked out into a downpour. Fortunately, the car park was right next door. Unfortunately, his old car sat on the top level, exposed to the elements.

Once inside the car, he realized he was soaked, and the car seat would become that way too. He wasn't typically English in the sense of habitually complaining about the weather, no matter what. Instead, he cursed only when the weather was bad, and he wasn't prepared for it. He'd have to go home and change.

He first found a dirty rag in the backseat to dry his hands off enough to comfortably shift and steer and then turned the key with a threat and a prayer. The starter made a grinding sound, but the motor started. "Just get me home, you piece of junk, and I'll kiss your feekin' bonnet!"

He made it. His space was taken by another car, though, so he parked in front of his caravan. *I'll have to lodge a complaint!* He decided that was an omen for good luck, though, because he wouldn't get wet that much more to get inside. In a last bit of irony, though, the rain stopped and the sun came out. He raised both middle fingers towards the heavens and then entered his caravan.

"I've been waiting for you," Christy Dowd said. "Where have you been?"

Chapter Four

Rather than answer—seeing Christy sitting there all dry and in good humor was a turn-off—Ben said, “I told you I was going to the pub, hen.”

“For a late lunch.” She looked at her watch. “It’s half past five, or later, if my watch got wet and stopped, which it keeps doing in this damned weather.”

“I was working too. I like to do that in a pub. Some people do it at a Starbucks, drinking their awful coffee; I do it in a pub, drinking a good lager or ale.”

“But why downtown? There must be a pub around here. Pubs are everywhere. There are enough sots around Dunford to keep them busy, I dare say.”

“Downtown’s where the action is, hen. For example, what happened today.” He hung up his jacket and stripped off his jersey. “Turn your head if you don’t want to see me in my underwear. I think they’re dry, but you never know, so it could be a worse sight if the dampness makes them transparent. Or an improvement, depending on your point of view.”

He was a bit chuffed when he saw her peek, but then thought, *She’s a feckin’ nurse. She’s seen everything!*

“What are you doing here, by the way?” he said.

“Curiosity’s most of the reason. I wanted to see how a freelance reporter lives. If that’s what you really are, and you call this caravan living.”

He was now dressed in a bathrobe...and at least felt drier. “I’ll have you know, Miss Smarty-Pants Nurse Lady, I sold an article about the shooting just a while ago to *The Town Crier* for eight-hundred quid. Not bad for a few hours’ work, right?”

She was aghast. “You didn’t mention my name, did you?”

“Of course not. We two are just ‘concerned citizens’ in the article. I described the dragon lady and her chauffer, though. Figured it’ll help that plod and his team find them ‘cause now everybody in Dunford will be looking for them, even people up and down the coast. Some other concerned citizen will probably recognize them from my description and turn them in. They clearly contracted for the hit.”

“What are you blathering about? You don’t know any of that!”

He shrugged. “Reasonable guesses. That inspector might have others, but he should consider mine as well.”

“You’re an arrogant, conceited, self-righteous—”

“I love you too, Christy,” he said with a smile.

Christy turned red, recovered, and looked around the caravan. “This is nicer than I thought it would be. It’s like a small flat on wheels. And, to be honest, you do keep it tidy.”

Ben shrugged. “Habits developed in the military: Living in tight quarters and keeping it ready for any inspection suppose you could hitch up this caravan and take it somewhere else as designed, but a nice lady rents them, most of them during the summer months. But you’re so correct: It has everything I need, and she’s even my security guard. Walks around, Mrs. Delgado does—she’s a lovable old hen ‘bout this high—” He indicated someone less than five-feet tall—“who patrols her property with a shotgun dressed in khaki camos and looking like a big-game hunter in miniature. By the way, hen, how did you get in here?”

“The old credit-card trick. Your lock isn’t very good quality.”

“You’re lucky she didn’t spot you then. If she had seen you breaking and entering during one of her rounds, she’d shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Her gun’s loaded?”

“I’ve never asked. Just assumed it was. Haven’t seen her carry any extra cartridges, though, so maybe she’d only have two shots. I’m guessing that’s probably enough for most burglars.”

“What about assassins on motorcycles?”

“Good question. I’m assuming he can’t find me here.”

“What about me?”

“You weren’t in scrubs or nurse’s uniform. He can’t know much about you. I was more obvious, standing right next to that Jag. He looked right at me looking at him.”

She shuddered. “You don’t think...?”

He shook his head. “I’m hoping he’s thinking, ‘The job’s done.’ And he’s off to somewhere else for another one. The rich bitch and her driver didn’t get a good look at me ‘cause I didn’t get a good look at them.”

“Enough to call him Odd-Job.”

“Just an impression. Probably neither one’s seen that 007 movie. It’s an old one.”

“Which you obviously saw.”

“Read the book; saw the movie. Those old Bond films were better than the more recent ones ‘cause they stuck to the books. Later, they did what most Hollywood studios do: Ruin the book or produce schlock! Write an all-action script with no drama. *Mission Impossible* really is impossible, not to mention Tom Cruise. At least Sean Connery looked like a real spy. The best fiction has to seem real.”

“Like yours?”

He smiled. “Maybe. I’m probably just one of many authors who won’t have any success because the traditional publishing conglomerates stick with all their old formulaic fiction writers.”

“Would I like one of your books?”

He jumped up from the stool where he’d perched, searched in a cardboard box, and handed her a new paperback. She looked at the cover; it featured a slutty bird holding a gun and was titled *Live Dangerously or Die*; the author was Ben Alderman. She waved the book at him.

“Your motto for living?”

He shrugged. “Hers, anyway. My principal character’s. Maybe the description of my life so far? You heard me tell Ed that I have PTSD. So the docs say.”

“You call that inspector Ed as if you know him.”

“Let’s just say he knows me. I’ve received a few tongue lashings from him before. He doesn’t like reporters. Most coppers don’t.”

Christy was tired of talking about the case. Instead, she said, “Do you have any food here?”

“Um, not much, hen. There’s a bottle of scotch somewhere.”

“I demand you feed me. I’ve been waiting here forever. You can’t leave me starving after that! What had you planned to eat otherwise?”

“Do you mean you didn’t come here to seduce me?”

“Don’t kid yourself. I wanted to talk. We talked. Now I need food.”

She got up and straightened her hair a bit. He decided she looked just ducky while he still looked like a wet duck. He felt the usual stirring in his loins. *Damn, I need a cold shower!*

“We’ll have to go out to eat. That local pub you talked about. It’ll be a bit noisy, but they have tasty specials every night. Let me get dressed.”

“I’ll wait in my car. I’m not ready for another peep show.” She left, slamming the door.

He’d just finishing tying his trainers when he heard the ping on his moby. He checked the text message, finished dressing, and then left as well. As he slid into Christy’s car—a much nicer one than his—he waved the phone.

“Message from our favorite rozzar Ed. You probably got the same one unless he’s a misogynist prick who assumes we’ve been off shagging somewhere. He says he’s written up all what we told him, so we can visit his nick anytime to take a look.”

“How nice of him. Do you have the address?”

“I can be your GPS.”

“Let’s go and see if that pub has any food left before going there. By the way, I saw your landlord aka security guard. She gave me the evil eye.”

“Probably because you took my parking spot.” He opened the door. “Back out and wait while I put my old car where it belongs. Otherwise, she might shoot out your tires. Or mine.”

Chapter Five

DI Ed Stevenson showed up at the hospital a bit miffed that he'd not been able to finish half his pint of ale nor have any dessert. His detective sergeant, Tim Wells, had called to tell him that the shooting victim was now awake and ready to talk. They now knew his name was Arthur Kent.

As Ed entered the patient's room at the NHS clinic, the same one where Christy Dowd worked, the inspector realized that Kent was no superman. He looked pale and tired. *You're damned lucky you're not dead!* Ed thought. He pulled a chair over to sit beside the patient's bed.

"You have fifteen minutes max, Inspector," the NHS doctor said as he finished studying the patient's charts.

Ed nodded. It would have to be enough for now. "Good evening, Mr. Kent. I'm Inspector Edward Stevenson. I'd like you to tell me a little about yourself, if you don't mind, specifically anything that might explain why someone has targeted you."

"Arthur Kent, Inspector," the patient said, offering a hand. Ed shook it but not vigorously. It wasn't attached to the wounded shoulder, but Ed figured any motion might cause the patient some pain. "I-I'm here on business. I'm British, but I live in New York City now. My company is trying to complete an important business deal. A boring bit of what I thought would be last-minute negotiations, if I'm honest, so I took a walk in that lovely little park."

How would the attacker or the people in the Jag have known that? Ed then smiled. *Of course. Easy enough. Someone from that meeting told them!* That would limit the suspect pool somewhat.

"Can you tell me anything about that business deal and the people attending?"

"A bit, I suppose. We're buying into *Hercules Limited*. A controlling interest, to be precise."

Ed searched his memory because he'd sensed that Arthur thought he should have heard about that company. "The security software firm?"

"Very good, Inspector, but not quite right. *Hercules Limited* has some AI algorithms we're interested in. My New York firm is *Security Solutions Incorporated*. We're leaders in using AI for security purposes. HAL on steroids and on a mass scale to protect server farms, utility networks, and so forth. *Hercules Limited* has some new variations on that theme. It's a good deal for both of us. At least it was. I'm not sure where everything stands now."

"I see. A lot of money involved?"

"Money as well as stock shares. Not that unusual in international business deals, I'd say. And I have no idea why someone would think they could kill the deal by killing me."

"No one from *Hercules* or *Security Solutions* has contacted us or other authorities after the attempt on your life."

"The meeting wouldn't have continued without me. And they might have only called here at the hospital to get updates on my progress."

"Um, maybe not continuing the meeting was the point?" Ed patted Arthur on his good shoulder. "You must focus on getting better. I have to be off now 'cause I have lot of work awaiting me. I'll keep you informed, Mr. Kent."

Once in the car, Ed called Tim. "All hands on deck, lad! There'll be a meeting tomorrow morning because we've got ourselves a major case. Find out anything you can about *Hercules Limited*, *Security Solutions Incorporated*, and a business deal they're putting together. Who's involved, et cetera, et cetera. Meeting at eight a.m., no excuses accepted for not attending."

Damn, he thought, this could be big! National defense big! A cold chill ran over him. MI5 and MI6-style big? I sure hope not!

The next morning at the Dunford substation, Tim didn't have much more information for Ed beyond what Arthur Kent had told the inspector. "They've kept that deal mostly secret, Guv, and want it to remain that way."

"Yes, I expected that. We're going to need a warrant, damn it. We're not going to get anything done without more information about this deal. Be prepared to sign an NDA, lad. Some of our colleagues will have to do so as well."

"How are your witnesses involved?"

"By accident, it seems. Wrong place, wrong time. They were lucky they weren't killed along with Kent. I sent you a copy of the first draft I made for their statements. They should come in sometime today to edit and sign it. That's easier than asking them to do them from scratch. The bloke's a bit nervous and impatient even though he's a damned journalist. The worst kind: A freelancer!"

Tim shrugged. "Probably not important except maybe for the quality of his description."

"Um, I want a uniformed patrol following each one, though. Especially the nurse. They're good witnesses—maybe the best I've had—and the shooter might want to tidy things up a bit by eliminating them. If he tries and gets away with it, we could be swimming in a deep shite hole."

Tim smiled. "Good way to flush him out maybe?"

"Don't even think about it, lad. They're just innocent and normal folks. And I want to nick the entire trio of killers, especially the driver and anyone who ordered the hit on Mr. Kent. Read the rough drafts to see what I mean. Is our meeting sorted?"

"For ten. The DCI wants to attend."

"Oh joy. He probably got bloated last night as he often does and will come in with a hangover. I suppose it's an opportunity to get him going on a warrant, though. I have a bad feeling that Kent's legal eagles will resist that, damn them."

The meeting was a disaster. Two of Ed's team had tied the knot, so the DCI wasn't the only one with a hangover. The affected team members were just lethargic; Gerald Cox was antagonistic.

"I don't see why we need to get involved in someone's business deal gone wrong," the DCI said. "Let the Competition and Markets Authority handle it."

Ed bristled. "I don't think they solve crimes sir."

He shrugged. "Then let them give the case to some other government office that does. We shouldn't get involved in businesses' skullduggery, Ed. You'll not find anyone at this station who knows a damned thing about accounting."

All because he's too lazy to do what needs to be done to get a warrant! Ed then realized he hadn't asked the DCI to do that yet. "We can bring someone in to look at what's gone on in their meetings. To that end, I'd like to ask for your help in generating the appropriate warrants."

There were several nods among the team members; Cox saw them. He sighed. "Okay, will do, if you think it's the way to go. I think it's a waste of time, and time costs money. Have your sergeant set things up. I'll sign the paperwork and send it on to the Super."

To get the rest of the police bureaucracy involved! "Fine. Tim, can you work on that?" The DS nodded, but he didn't look too happy about it. "We also need to determine if anyone saw which direction the motorcycle and the Jaguar were headed after the shooting. Those buildings

have security guards, for example, and there might be security cameras that caught them fleeing. I'd like to find the bullet that went through Mr. Kent's shoulder as well. Nine mm is a common enough round, but we want to confirm that and see where the ammo originated. That could be important."

"Aye, the shooter could be a Chinese agent." Cox said.

That drew some laughs. "Actually, not funny, Guv, because we're talking industrial security here. I'll talk to our IT personnel. They might have someone who knows something about AI. About the only thing I know is that it means 'artificial intelligence,' but how that can help protect industrial secrets is beyond me."

"You're a good man, Ed, to admit to your limitations," the DCI said.

The inspector would remember that dig. Cox would get payback sometime in the future.
What a wanker!

SAMPLE

Chapter Six

“Your boyfriend annoys the inspector,” Tim said to Christy.

She’d asked the sergeant how Ben had found the inspector’s written report about his eyewitness account before she sat down to review and okay her own.

“I believe they’ve had words before, those two,” the sergeant added. He handed her three sheets of paper. “I’ll leave you to yours.”

Maybe the inspector thought she was a bit uncomfortable being alone with him in the interrogation room? “You can stay. I’ll only take a minute. And I hope the inspector doesn’t feel the same way about me. He reminds me of my old father.”

Tim smiled. *Ed might be more annoyed by her thinking he was old!* He didn’t have to wait long.

“The report’s fine as it is. Do I just sign it?” He nodded; she signed. “What’s next?”

“Um, nothing now for you two. You’ve both done your civic duty. Did you have to take time away from work? You can show them the copy I’ll give you, but don’t let them read it, please.”

“I’m on a lunch break. I think I’ll take advantage of being here in the neighborhood to shop at that sweater store down the street. I need a gift for a niece. She’s turning thirteen, but she’s already a picky teenager. How time flies!”

“You must like children since you’re a pediatric nurse. I suppose that in the ER you get a lot of sprained ankles, broken limbs, scraped knees, and the like. You’d think my own nippers lived in a combat zone.”

She sighed. “We get some seriously ill and wounded too, both children and adults, especially the wee ones and the wrinklies. Just yesterday, before that drive-by shooting, we had an elderly bloke who’d broken his hip; he was trying to prune a fruit tree and fell off his ladder. Always something. Some patients we can’t save, and that’s always depressing.” She stood. “Thank the inspector for me. He did a good job on my witness statement.” At the door, she turned towards Tim again. “Wouldn’t it be easier for the inspector to avoid the interviews and just have us come in to make our statements?”

“When he thinks there’s time for it, he likes to get witness statements as soon as possible. Have you any news about Arthur Kent’s condition?”

“He’s doing fine. They’re not letting him go just yet because of the concussion. The shoulder wound should heal nicely.”

“What’s the prognosis for the concussion?”

“Frustration on his part, I’m sure. He wants out. He has some business meeting he wants to continue.”

“There’s no backup for him?”

“I understand they’d need to send someone over here from the States.”

“Do you have any additional information about what kind of business deal he’s negotiating?”

“Not a clue. I’d just be able to parrot the words back if I did. I know nothing about AI except that every online retailer seems to offer an AI assistant now. Frankly, I don’t see any difference between them and the old software assistants; it’s Siri, Alexa, Cortana, and so forth all over again, and I rarely used those. Women like to window shop, sergeant, even if it’s via an online window. We don’t want any so-called assistants hassling us.” She laughed. “Probably too

much self-analysis for you. Take care of your nippers, sergeant. I don't want to see them in my ER."

She gave a little wave over her shoulder as she left the room.

SAMPLE

Chapter Seven

Sometime before, after signing his witness statement, Ben had decided to visit that same downtown pub for an early lunch because he'd mostly skipped breakfast. While waiting for his food—ham-and-cheese sandwich with crisps—and his half-lager, he visited *The Town Crier* site to see how his article had resonated.

There were over one thousand comments already, some even received from the continent. There were some outlandish claims about a government conspiracy, Russian assassins, savage migrants who must be responsible, American assassins (because people thought the bike was American—it wasn't—and its rider was from the CIA sent to kill a fellow American), and on and on. One comment was a bit more believable if not sinister, though: "Mr. Alderman, I'm coming for you!" A frisson went down his back. *Is that a singular or plural "you"?* Was he the only target, or both Christy and Ben? He was still staring at the threatening comment when someone deleted it. The ezine probably censored out obvious threats.

Should I report this to Ed Stevenson?

Ben had never involved the police when he received threatening comments to other articles. He got them all the time. None of them had been acted upon, but none of them had followed a shooting.

He finished his lunch and left for home, not remembering much of the drive. As he pulled into his allotted parking spot—the owner allowed one space for a renter's vehicle and a cut-out space in front for a visitor—he saw the caravan's entrance door was open. He ran there and looked inside. What he saw almost made him lose his lunch: Mrs. Delgado was on the floor lying in a pool of blood!

The next few moments were a blur. He remembered calling the police, managing to convince some receptionist a murder had occurred, and she should call Detective Inspector Stevenson. He then had called Christy, who wasn't available because she was helping some wrinkle who'd broken his hip. He wished her luck and broke the connection.

He waited in his car for the police, SOCOs, and anyone else official to come and remove the body of the woman who'd befriended him so often. First to arrive was the police pathologist and his slaves, all in an old van from the morgue. Apparently, the dispatcher hadn't been such a ditz after all and had understood there was a body. SOCOs then arrived, and finally Ed Stevenson, the first copper on scene.

Ben was still a bit stunned, sitting there in his car. The inspector slid into the passenger seat, concern on his face winning out over his usual bulldog expression. "Are you okay?"

Ben nodded without looking into the old man's eyes. "I okayed the witness statement."

Before Ben or Ed could say anything more, an officer in uniform rapped on the passenger-side window. The inspector rolled it down. The uniform whispered something to Ed; he nodded and rolled the window back up to shut out the cold and mist.

"Do you own a shotgun, lad?"

"No way. That's Mrs. Delgado's. She does her own security here. Quite good at it, usually. Not today, obviously."

"We're guessing at the details for now, but it looks like someone wrestled the gun away from her, beat her with its stock, and then shot her twice in the chest. A lot of rage there, I'd say."

"Could it be connected to yesterday's shooting?"

"You tell me. It's your caravan. Did you find her snooping, lad?"

“How dare you! Ines Delgado was a dear friend! I told your receptionist, dispatcher, whatever that woman is, what happened. Well, most of it. I felt her carotid and knew she was dead. I didn’t even see the gun, Inspector. Where did you find it?”

“In that little closet you most likely call a shower stall. Somebody covered it with shampoo and ran hot water on it.”

“To eliminate DNA and fingerprints?”

Ed thought a moment. “Maybe. Not a bad idea, actually. SOCOs still might find some traces, though. Other than her carotid, did you touch anything else?”

“No sir. But my DNA and prints will be all over the inside of that caravan. I didn’t touch anything besides her neck. I know better than that. I write some crime fiction. I came right out here to the car and called your nick.”

“Good show. Did you call Christy too? She’s here now.”

The nurse’s car was just pulling up and parking in the space in front of the caravan.

“I came as soon as I could,” Christy said as she pushed aside some refuse to sit on Ben’s backseat. “What’s happened?”

“While you give her a summary,” Ed said, opening the passenger’s door, “I’m going to establish some order here. Things are getting a bit out of hand. Where’s my damned sergeant?”

Christy wasn’t about to say that she’d just left Tim. She shook off an old bacon roll wrap that had stuck to one hand and then replaced the inspector in the passenger seat. “How can you be such a neat freak inside your caravan and tolerate such a messy car?”

“’Tis payback to the old piece of junk, hen, for the many times this damned machine decides to take a nap and not start.”

“Ever thought about taking it to a mechanic? Or getting a new one?”

“That’s me being sentimental. I keep it going. Barely, to be honest. And yes, any reliable mechanic would recommend euthanasia for this piece of crap. Now...do you want to know what happened here or not?”

“Do you know?”

“Not all of it. Neither does the inspector, I dare say.”

“Is it connected to yesterday’s incident?”

“Precisely what I asked Stevenson. Maybe our Ed can eventually answer your question. Mrs. Delgado was murdered with her own shotgun, Christy.” His eyes teared a bit. “She was a lovely old hen, that wrinkle.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize she meant so much to you.”

“The mum I never had.” He pounded the panel below the windscreen, leaving a dent in the faux leather that was now cracked and dirty from age. “The bastard that did it is going to pay!”

“It would be better to let the inspector handle it.”

“Bollocks! Anywhere he’d go, scrotes would know he’s a plod. He might as well wear a sign announcing it. This has to be an undercover op. I’ve done them before.”

“To write news stories, I presume, not to nick real murderers.”

“There’s that. Several exposes got people arrested, though. ‘Investigative journalism,’ they call it. Illegal dumping, price gouging, things like that.”

“But no murders?”

“Okay okay, I get it! Obviously, her killer’s a dangerous wanker, just like that motorcyclist in the park.” He stopped and stared blankly at Christy for a moment. “Maybe that

motorcyclist killed Mrs. Delgado in a rage because he didn't find me here, and she caught him snooping." Ben opened his door. "I have to tell Ed."

She went with him to find the inspector. They found him and waited patiently while he gave two uniformed officers and his sergeant a tongue-lashing. After the three left, Ed turned on them.

"Well? What do you troublemakers want?"

"I have a theory," Ben said.

"So did that chap who thought the Universe was some steady state machine."

That took Ben aback. Christy had to grab the baton in the relay.

"Ben thinks Mrs. Delgado's killer was the motorcyclist who was here to look for Ben and kill him."

"It's possible. So's a steady state Universe if there's enough dark energy and matter being made. Or sumpin' like that. It's all like some shaman's mumbo-jumbo, I dare say. I thought of that damned motorcyclist. I don't like coincidences, but sometimes that's what we get. In any case, Mrs. Delgado surprised some intruder who was searching Ben's caravan, probably wanting to know where Ben was. You both can thank me that you went to the nick to sign your statements."

"I suppose," Ben said.

Chapter Eight

A tall man looking a bit like an astronaut in a spacesuit approached the inspector, Christy, and Ben. “We’re done here, Ed. We have a lot more analysis to do back in the lab, but Mr. Alderman can return to his caravan now.”

“Come with me, young Ben,” Ed said. “You too, Miss Dowd, if you can manage to stay out of our way.”

“What does that mean,” Christy said, anger on her face.

“Your boyfriend here’s going to go over every inch of his caravan to see if anything’s missing, that’s what, and I’ll be watching both of you.”

“That’s a waste of time!” Ben said. “Haven’t we agreed that the intruder was looking for me?”

“If the intruder was the motorcyclist or one of the persons in that Jag, yes. But I’m keeping my options open. Might just be someone from around here wanting money for the next fix, or something valuable to sell to get it. Not clear why he’d think he’d find it in a caravan, of course, but addiction can addle the mind.”

“I agree it will be a waste of time,” Christy said, still angry about the warning to stay out of the way. “Wasted words too, Inspector. I must get back to work. If you’re so damned smart, invent an excuse for me for being late this time.”

“Tell them the truth, Miss Dowd, and to call me if they don’t believe you.” Ed handed her one of his cards. “Give them that. I’m guessing you misplaced the last one. And please keep your eyes open. You might be on that trio’s hit list as well.”

She turned even redder. “Shouldn’t you plods provide some protection for me then?”

“Not a chance. One, your hospital has its own security. Two, I’ll be scraping the bottom of the barrel to get sufficient personnel for two investigations now.” He held up a hand like a transit officer as she breathed deeply as if she was preparing to launch another verbal attack. “I know what you’re going to say: It’s probably only one investigation. But we don’t know that for sure. Maybe Mrs. Delgado has a boyfriend too, a jealous wanker who wants revenge for some perceived grievance.”

“Do you just make this shite up?” Ben said. “Mrs. Delgado’s a widow lady. Was. Her husband was a war hero in Yugoslavia, an immigrant from British Honduras who fought bravely for the UK.”

“You’re the writer who makes up things, maybe even that, as far as I know. And haven’t you ever heard of a merry widow who fooled around when her old man was overseas? Happens all the time, lad.”

“Do you always see the bad side of human nature?” Christy asked. “And don’t speak ill of the dead.”

“As a copper, especially as an SIO, I have to keep an open mind. Now, Mr. Alderman, let’s go turn your little caravan inside out and upside-down. Consider it an opportunity to clean out some of your junk.”

“I don’t have any junk. And I take care of my place!”

“He does,” Christy said. “He’s almost obsessive about it, I’d say.”

“We’ll see.”

Earlier, at the hospital, the motorcyclist had been disguised as an orderly, complete with lanyard featuring a picture of himself. His name wasn’t really James Calder, of course; the real

Jim Calder was dead, his body dressed only in boxers as it sat propped up in a corner of a closet filled with janitorial supplies.

This false orderly had cursed when he'd learned he was too late, that Arthur Kent had been discharged. *Back to square one there!* His trip to the NHS facility wasn't a complete waste, though. He'd spotted the woman from the park bench. *So, she's a nurse! Who knew?*

At the moment, she was being raked over the coals by an ER doctor, something about shirking her duties. The motorcyclist waited patiently. Finally, the doc looked disgusted and walked away. The nurse looked angry enough to cut off his balls. *Where's an HR personnel rep when you need one?* he thought with a smile.

He still couldn't get near her, though. She flitted about like a hummingbird hawk-moth that might be seen in the hospital's garden areas during the summer: To the ICU, patients' prep for the OR, blood samples here, sugar tests there, and bedpans and piss bottle everywhere.... She was a hard worker. *But maybe her anger had energized her?* He'd never want to work that hard! She was like a slave with the physicians her slave masters. And all the time having to put on a smiling face for the doctors, colleagues, and patients. *She should get a feckin' medal!*

He wasn't sure she was the correct person to go after either. She looked different in the nurse's uniform if she was. Prettier. Agile and graceful movements as she went through her boring routine. He could understand how a soldier could fall in love with a nurse like that. *And I had the feckin' bad luck of having a male nurse overseas!*

She received a call, spoke for a few moments to the caller, and then left. He gave up and left too. She hadn't seen his face in the park, after all. *That lad might have seen the boss's face, though, certainly Kim's!*

Once at the caravan park, he broke into the lad's trailer. He hadn't had the time to question the old lady. She'd surprised him, in fact. If he'd been a bit calmer, he might have learned something about Ben Alderman besides his name. *But she was going to shoot me, the old bitch!* He'd made her pay for that!

Would young Ben Alderman ever return to his feckin' caravan? Or had it just become another crime scene for the damned plods? Where was that damned reporter now?

That's what the boss had said Ben was, why she wanted him out of the way, a target second in importance only to Kent. That's what she'd told him. And sure enough, that wanker had tried to save Kent. The pair had done that, in fact!

Maybe it's time to not trust anything the boss told him? End the loss to his rep and kill her and Kim?

After nearly a boring hour spent with Inspector Stevenson—indeed, a complete waste of time—and almost another hour wasted as the inspector quizzed him about Mrs. Delgado, the inspector had let Ben go.

He had then looked at his watch. Unless Christy worked overtime to make up for hours lost, she'd be going off duty about now. He wanted to talk with her about a few things. He found her waiting at the bus stop.

“Rough day?”

She turned to see him; she'd just been staring at raindrops hitting puddles, completely oblivious to her surroundings.

“I was debating with myself about calling a cab.”

Ben guessed that with two shootings and the trips to and from the caravan park, she'd already gone through a month's worth of funds for cabs. Maybe even bus tickets? "You were in a car at the caravan park."

"I borrow cars from my colleagues. They need them now. Do you have a car? I need a ride. The weather's awful, although the rain seems to be in a bit of a lull."

"I thought you didn't like my old junk-heap?"

"It takes one from point A to B, doesn't it?"

"Depends on where A and B are...and its mood." He rubbed his two hands together. "But I have you in my power now, my sweet."

She smiled. "Why are you here? Looking for me?"

"Maybe. I need some recovery time after wasting two hours with Inspector Stevenson. And let's face it, hen: You're a lot better looking than that old fart-face."

"I would think so. So, you're offering me a ride home?"

"After taking you out to dinner. We left my poor caravan in a shambles, not all caused by the inspector, I'll admit. The pathologist and SOCOs contributed to the mess, and there's blood stains that might never come out."

"What will happen to the caravan park with Mrs. Delgado gone?"

"No idea. The legal eagles will get their talons on it, I suppose."

Chapter Nine

DI Ed Stevenson knew that he needed to find the Jaguar's driver and passenger. The motorcycle-assassin was just the hitman, probably the Jaguar passenger's hired killer. The place where Ed decided to begin his quest was with the victim, Arthur Kent.

That was why he was heading for the building where that business meeting had continued after Kent's release from the hospital. After arriving there, he had to wait until the participants took a break. When Arthur came out, Ed approached him.

"Mr. Kent, can I have a word?"

A woman stood next to Arthur. *She doesn't have red hair*, Ed thought.

"Oh, hello Inspector. This is Sally Brock, CFO of *Hercules Limited*. Sally, Inspector Ed Stevenson from the police."

They shook hands, Ed uncomfortably because his paw was twice the size of her delicate hand, and he always worried about squeezing a woman's small hand too hard. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Brock." The "Miss" was only an assumption; she had no rings.

"My pleasure also, Inspector Stevenson." She turned to Arthur. "You can borrow my office. I'll have some refreshments sent in. Don't dawdle, though. We still have a lot of business to discuss." She disappeared down a dark corridor.

"Follow me, Inspector." After they sorted seats around a table in the CFO's office, Arthur made a steeple of his hands and rested his chin on his fingertips. "I only have fifteen minutes or so. Ask what you may."

"So, the negotiations are still going forward?"

Arthur sighed. "They're playing hardball now."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"American idiom. You learn to understand the crazy Yanks, and then you start talking like them. The same thing happened to me in Berlin and Paris as well. Of course, it's also about the languages, not just their idiomatic expressions. That particular expression means that they're trying to make the deal's conditions more favorable to them."

"I suppose Miss Brock is leading the charge?"

"Not really. Not completely, at any rate. But you didn't come to talk to me about high finance, Inspector."

"I don't fly in those heavy clouds, no. I need to ask you a few questions. Who benefitted by the delay in negotiations?"

Arthur shrugged. "I can't see that anyone did. The intention might not have been just delay, though. Right? I was lucky. I could have been killed."

"Temporarily if longer or permanently, there'd be a delay. Your company would have had to send a replacement for you in either case to immediately move forward, correct?"

"Ah, I see your point now. A replacement would indeed be hard to come by because I have controlling interest in *Security Systems Incorporated*. And, if I died, all my shares would be wrapped up in legalities involving my heirs."

"In other words, your murder might have ended negotiations?"

"Yes. Our company has competitors, though, and some of them might have come forward and made offers." He frowned. "Perhaps even better ones than ours. I don't think they'd have stooped to murder, though."

"Would *Hercules* know of these better offers waiting in the wings?"

"You have a devious mind, Inspector."

“I do my best,” Ed said with a smile. “But theories about motivations will get me nowhere without hard evidence. That’s what I need.”

The police found the Jaguar’s driver before finding its passenger. Ben’s Odd-Job look-alike was spotted by an alert uniformed officer as the driver entered a chemist’s shop not far from *Hercules’* HQ. Ed took no chances: He sent an ARU to collect that possibly dangerous bloke.

It was a good thing he did: Harold Kim put two AROs in the hospital before the team could subdue him with multiple Taser zaps. “Would have been a lot easier just to shoot the damned bastard,” the lead ARO observed to Ed.

When Ed and Tim interrogated the Jaguar’s presumptive driver, they still had two AROs with Tasers in IR1 with them, one stationed in each corner of the room, even though Kim was in chains. There was no solicitor present—the driver hadn’t wanted one.

“You have nothing on me,” he said in heavily accented English.

Ed ignored the man’s claim. They had Ben’s eyewitness testimony that made Kim an accomplice of the motorcyclist, and also for resisting arrest, so Ed wanted to get on with the interrogation.

“Who’s your boss, Mr. Kim? Your passenger, the woman with you in the Jaguar?”

“Don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no Jaguar nor no woman.”

“We have a witness who saw you and your passenger talking to an assassin on a motorcycle, who then tried to kill someone. That makes you two accomplices to attempted murder.”

“No comment.”

“We have the plate number of the Jaguar, Mr. Kim.”

Ed detected a slight smile. He now knew the plates had been switched. *Did they also steal the Jag?*

“We have a good description of your passenger. If you come clean, it can help your case. Is she connected to the *Security Systems-Hercules* deal?” Doubt briefly visited the man’s face, but then there was another thin smile...and “No comment.”

Ed tried another tactic. “Some of my colleagues want to charge you with being a spy for North Korea, Mr. Kim, and turn you over to MI5. Years ago, that would have meant a death sentence. Aren’t you lucky? Now it only means that you’ll spend the rest of your life in prison. Like the police, MI5 isn’t a fan of assassination attempts made by foreign agents.”

Now there was a frown but still the same “No comment.”

“Your family might end up in prison too, or they’ll be sent back to North Korea. Do you want that to occur?”

Now Kim strained against the chains, trying to rise and reach over to grab Ed. “You bastards! Leave my family alone!”

While Ed’s threat would probably require Home Office intervention, it was possible; but he’d never want to ask the government to make good on it because the wanker’s family might be innocent. He’d made it to get a response. He was pleased that his tactic had worked.

“I’ll be happy to intercede on their behalf if you tell us who your passenger was.”

Kim sat and looked around the room, first at the burly AROs and then at Ed and Tim. “I’m not North Korean. I’m English. I was born in Birmingham.”

The accent had all but disappeared. The broad, burly man could speak as well as any Oxford graduate.

“We’ll confirm that. We still might be sending your family back to North Korea. And you’ll be here in jail.”

Kim glared at Ed. “You said that it would help my case if I told you who my passenger was. I need details. I want you to help my family. My wife comes from a nice immigrant family from South Korea, not that garbage tip in the north. My children were born here.”

“If convenient, we can always say that you were just taking orders from your passenger. Who is she? Was she the mastermind for the assassination? Did she order the hit?”

“She calls herself Cruella. Considers that humorous, I think. I don’t know her real name. Never saw her before this last gig. She hired Max; Max approached me.”

“Who’s Max?”

“Max Snyder. He was the shooter on the motorcycle.”

“So you’d never met her before? What about Max?”

“Seemed like he knew her from before. I’m not sure. Max, he’s been around. Good rep in his line of work. I sure couldn’t do it. I’m a pacifist.”

That’s hard to believe considering he put the AROs into the hospital. “Where does this Max live or hang out?”

“In Tildon, a village west of here. I don’t know the address. He just calls me; I just call him.”

Tim left the room. “Okay. Do you have a last name for Cruella?”

He laughed. “No first one either. She had that damn wig on. Probably expensive, but it means I can’t describe her real well. Except she had on a lot of makeup.”

“What color was the wig?”

“What does that matter?”

Ed shrugged. “Just wondering.”

“The wig made her into a redhead, as if she had Celtic ancestors. Sort of went with her green eyes.”

And they could have been contacts, Ed thought. He was more appreciative of Ben’s observational skills now.

Ed decided that they’d now have to focus on the biker. Tildon was fortunately small, more a bedroom community for locals commuting into the city. There was a chance that a man on a fancy bike like the one used in the assassination attempt had been noticed by a number of witnesses there. Someone might even know where Max lived.

Chapter Ten

Ben opened his eyes enough to admire Christy's happy, lovely face. 'Twas a pleasantly oval one framed by soft brown hair now a bit tangled and sweaty. *She'll want food*, he thought. *Does she have any here?*

She'd gone after him like a nymphomaniac, guiding his hands, taking the top side, whatever. *She'd been a wild woman!* And he'd enjoyed every minute of it.

Of course, he'd responded. He was no fool! Okay, maybe foolish in trying to match her passion. As a nurse, she'd most likely know that in sex the female human body could outlast a male's. Harems made no sense at all except in the accounting of a sultan's riches. Maybe as part of her nursing studies she'd even studied how to overcome his inadequacies and maximize his pleasure as well as hers? Were such skills learned science? Was she often shagging some young intern? Ben didn't much care. He wanted her all for himself now.

He'd slept some, but he was spent...and also hungry! She got up and smiled at him. He decided she looked good naked. He couldn't believe that he was responding again. She began to gather up her clothes. In the process, he could admire her butt, breasts, and pubic region from various viewpoints.

"I need a quick shower," she said. "I smell like a twenty-quid whore."

"Oh, hen, you're at least a five-hundred-quid gentleman's escort."

She threw a notebook at him. "I don't see any gentlemen around here." She smiled. "Just a lusty pillock."

"Save some hot water for me." His memory of the facilities was a blur, but there'd been a shower stall in that old pink-and-black-tiled bathroom. Her flat was larger than his caravan, but not by much; and she only had a single bed too. They'd managed, though!

"Um, there's only about five minutes of hot water. One of us will have to go *el stinko* to the pub. And it's not going to be me."

"Not if we both can fit."

They did. They fondled each other a bit, more to soap each other down. Afterwards, while she tried to do something with her hair, he dressed and checked his phone. Relaxing a bit while reading his text messages—they were mostly zero content—he noted how she was fussing with her hair.

"Wear a cap if you have one. It'll cover your damp hair."

She went to her closet and searched in a box. Finding a cap, she put it on and turned to model it. It was red with a white bill and black lettering that said *Manchester United*.

"You'd better not run into any *Manchester City* fans."

"That old city's miles away. Let's go before they stop serving food. It's not good to live on ale or lager alone."

The pub where she took him was popular, so it was noisy even for Saturday brunch as people focused on food instead of drink—many had too much of the latter on Friday night. And that loud noise background was useful: They could talk normally, and no one would be able to understand what they were saying.

Ben couldn't think of anything profound to say, though, so instead he said, "Did I make you fall out of bed?"

She stared at him a moment as she waited for her eyes to adjust from looking at her laptop's screen to his face mostly hidden in shadow. With her small bed, she could understand

how he might think that he'd crowded her: Unless they'd been in foreplay, shagging, or relaxing in the afterglow, there hadn't been much room for two adults. She'd solved the problem, though, by snuggling up to him and watching him sleep. Sex didn't make her sleepy afterwards.

"I thought of a way to find the assassin."

"Seemed like you were looking for places where motorcycles are sold."

"Precisely. Where classic and newer Triumphs are sold, specifically."

"Have you found any. Google's not British, you know. And it's not a popular brand with all the ebikes now available that cost less. Not to mention even cheaper petrol models like scooters. In fact, with all the rainy days we have around here, people probably prefer public transportation—cabs, busses, and trains—so they can keep dry." He waved a dismissive hand.

"We came here to eat and drink, hen. Let's enjoy our meal."

"Food, drink, and sex—men are so predictable."

"And making enough money to enjoy it all. Can we split the brunch cost?"

She frowned, "Are you destitute?"

He sighed. "I'll put it on my credit card. I think I have one that's not maxed out."

"Look! Here's a shop selling both new and used models. There's even one pictured that looks just like the assassin's."

She turned the laptop so he could see the screen. "A slightly newer model, but you're right. And isn't Tildon just northwest of here?"

"And here's another one! A bit farther away and south. Everything else seems too far unless the assassin usually lives that far away."

"What do you propose we do?"

"I have the day off. You never work, so you're always off. Drive me to these shops so we can see if they've sold or serviced a bike for a bloke with the same build as the assassin." She now frowned. "Even if they have security cameras, we didn't see his face, did we? How will we know for sure it's him?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, hen. The plates will probably be different as well. He'd be a fool not to have switched them."

"He could have switched them right there at the shop."

"Without the shop's owner knowing?"

"He could have gone back there at night to do it."

"Or, he just had a bunch of old plates at home."

"Look, you arse, it's just an idea to try. Got a better one?"

"Not really." He smiled at her. "And I'll try anything because I think that biker killed Mrs. Delgado."

Seeing his pain, she nodded. "Okay, peace treaty. Should we call Ed and tell him our plans?"

"No! He might try to stop us."

She thought a moment. "Maybe that would be a good thing."

He ignored her comment. "And if our idea doesn't get us anywhere, we'd be wasting his time as well as ours."

"Let's do it then."

Chapter Eleven

There weren't any phone books anymore, but the little town of Tildon offered an "official guide" to most of the town's businesses and tourist sites. Christy and Ben picked it up at the Tildon Tourist Bureau's office, a little rundown hut surely modelled after a bedsit found at the east entrance to the town.

With dark clouds starting to usurp the rule of their more democratic, peaceful, and puffier cousins' domain, they studied the map that guide contained—not very accurate but showing the most important "tourist spots" and businesses, i.e., those that had paid to be included in the guide—and in that way located the motorcycle shop. Once there, the salesman informed them after they offered a ten-quid bribe that they'd sold two Triumphs during the last year, one used and one new. Both had been paid for in cash. No receipts and no video surveillance remained of those transactions. From the salesman's description, though, either buyer could have been the assassin in the park.

Ben guessed that weather forecasters might be right in saying the region needed more rain, although saying that seemed akin to someone in the Sahara wanting more sand. He wasn't a farmer, but Tildon was a town surrounded by farm country. Maybe the farmers wanted rain, and the weather forecasters tried to keep them happy? In any case, they had it now, and it came down in sheets.

No wonder the locals weren't around. They'd be huddled in their farmhouses or a friendly and warm pub or restaurant partaking in that great British tradition imported from America, brunch. Ben figured that's where the assassin would be as well, more the latter than the former, because the writer couldn't imagine the motorcyclist owning some little farmhouse somewhere. And any local could have seen him on his bike and remembered him.

Christy took the restaurants—takeaway places, just in case; diners; and fancier more gourmet places—while Ben took the pubs. He'd eliminated the "lounges" if there were any—night spots where mostly naked women "entertained" horny men, or vice versa, that were likely closed after a busy Friday night. (He didn't really expect the "vice versa": The countryside was too conservative. While tolerating the former—men will be men, after all—places where women watched dancing men strip probably only existed in the wicked cities, especially London. And probably offer nothing that would attract their assassin.)

The town's two visitors met at a diner, both looking completely exhausted and frustrated. They'd encountered no one who knew a bike owner. Most couldn't even tell a Triumph from a Harley, but every motorcycle enthusiast knew that Triumph was English and Harley-Davidson was American.

The town's two strangers found a table by the window, but Christy had a better view of Tildon's High Street. Their diner was more like a cafeteria—customers got in line; walked along, indicating the food they wanted; and paid for it at the end—so Ben was soon considering a second serving of roast beef and roasted potatoes without the healthy sprouts his accompanying nurse had made him get, meaning he was calculating how long he'd have to wait in a line that had doubled in size since their arrival, a line filled with wet people coming inside from the downpour.

"A bloke's pulled up on a motorcycle, both looking a lot like what I remember from the shooting."

Ben had to lean a bit forward to see out the window, but he agreed with Christy. This wanker's helmet had no visor, though, so Ben could clearly see the bloke's face. He had a

handlebar mustache, but the build was what Ben remembered; it was probably the same bike too. He couldn't believe their good luck.

"He's heading across the street," Ben said. "Let's take a closer look at that bike."

"Good thing we already paid," Christy said, pushing her dishes towards the center of the table as she'd seen other customers do. She threw down a bill.

"What's that for then?"

"The lad that clears the dishes. He's cute."

"And about half your age, hen. The biker just entered that liquor store. Now's our chance."

Ben was almost certain it was the same bike, even though it had a different plate number. Christy was less certain now, though.

"Doesn't look as new," she said. "And wouldn't that bloke's huge mustache have protruded from underneath the visor the day of the shooting? It was touching the edges of his helmet straps now."

Ben shrugged. Witnesses' second guesses were often a theme in some of his novels. *But aren't four eyes better than two?*

"Let's take a stroll. He could be coming out at any time."

They continued to walk along as if they were returning to his car parked up the street. His prediction came true: The wanker exited from the store across the street, barely visible in the sheets of rain.

"What are we going to do to stop him from leaving?" Christy whispered.

"Keep walking." He showed her the cables in his hand. "He's not going anywhere."

But he did—to the barber shop. He walked past his bike and continued along the High Street to where there was a unisex salon, seemingly oblivious to the rain.

"Has the need for a haircut and shave, I suppose. He's got more stubble than I do. I keep my shearing costs to a minimum and do my own shaving."

"Because you don't make as much money as an assassin? Do you make any?"

"I get by. Remember, I just sold the story 'bout the shooting."

"Which is probably why he was able to find out where you live."

"Sod it!" He looked horrified. "I got Mrs. Delgado killed!"

"Don't be stupid. He killed your friend, not you. You didn't pull that trigger."

"Two triggers, one for each shotgun barrel. Um, that means he might not be armed now. He probably had already tossed the gun used in the park shooting."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because it was used in an attempted assassination?" He smiled.

"I suppose." She obviously didn't appreciate his macabre humor. "We've got to do something more than remove some wires. If he's not armed, can't we restrain him and hold him for the police?"

"You, me, and four other huge blokes maybe. I'm not a martial arts guru, and neither are you." He waved his mobile. "But I can call the police."

Fortunately, there was a bit of a lull, and Ben looked no different from others on the street more intent on their phones than their surroundings as he dialed nine-nine-nine. He explained to a desk sergeant who answered the call what was going on.

Chapter Twelve

“You two were rather foolish,” Ed Stevenson said to Ben and Christy when the inspector and his sergeant met the pair at the small Tildon police substation. “Fortunately, we were nearby.”

“Great minds think alike,” Ben said, winking at Christy.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m guessing you were looking at bike stores too?”

“No. We came here because your Odd-Job look-alike grassed on the biker, whose name is Max Snyder.”

“Did he say who the dragon lady is?” Christy said.

“No. He said ‘tis the biker who knows her. She hired him, your Korean bloke just drove her. But why am I here having a chinwag with you two? We have a biker we need to interrogate.”

“A ‘thank you’ might be in order, Inspector,” Christy said.

“For what? Putting yourselves in danger? We have enough trouble protecting citizens without them role-playing as amateur detectives.”

Ben shrugged. *The inspector’s a difficult man to deal with. How to get back at him?* “Call us if you need us. We’re on our way home now. Good luck with your interrogation.”

“Um, did you just stick around here after your call to annoy me?”

“That was partially my motive. But I also wanted to find out if the motorcyclist admits to killing Mrs. Delgado. Otherwise, we’ll continue looking.”

“No, you won’t!” But Ed softened. “Okay. I get that. You liked the old lady. Warning about the biker, though: He’s going to lawyer up and admit to nothing.”

“There’s the bike,” Christy said.

“Can you prove that bike was used in the park shooting?”

“No,” Ben said, “so we’ll keep looking for evidence.”

“Stay out of it, Ben.”

As the two detectives walked down the corridor of the Tildon substation to go interrogate the biker, Christy turned to Ben. “Really, what can we do now?”

He leered at her. “My first inclination is to say, ‘Let’s get a room.’ But that would be an expense neither one of us needs right now, I presume. But our biker must have one, right? In fact...” He waved a sheet of paper torn from a pad. “He provided an address when they booked him. I copied it when Stevenson wasn’t looking. Let’s hope it’s a real one.”

“That won’t please him, I dare say.”

“My goals in life are constantly changing, but one will never be pleasing Inspector Stevenson.” He saw her frown. “That’s mission impossible anyway.”

Like many older towns and villages clustered around better known larger English towns and cities, Tildon wasn’t all charm in its new role in suburbia. Embraced by middle class neighborhoods filled with commuters’ homes sporting traditional English gardens, it still had its seedy areas where now the destitute, drug addicts, alcoholics, and others left behind or neglected by an evolving society managed to find some places to lay their heads. Unfortunately, such areas also provided sanctuary for criminal elements, many practicing their art in the city, commuting along with those honest residents of the great middle class, simply because those areas weren’t well-policed.

So it was understandable that Ben felt a bit guilty when he took Christy to such a neighborhood looking for the address he'd stolen from Stevenson's desk. His only excuse might be that he didn't know the town. Neither he nor Christy had visited it before, but two pairs of eyes were better than one.

Originally the area corresponding to the address probably had been a market square. Its narrow, cobblestoned streets contained old brick buildings surrounded by a park that now looked like it had been the target of some errant shell the Russian army had fired at a small Ukrainian town. The park had its own biome: Scraggly trees, bushes, and weeds managed to survive the frequent flooding produced by drenching rains and become its flora; and rats and a few predatory birds who beat the feral cats to feast on them became its fauna.

Snyder's building—a fire-scarred brick monstrosity that might have once been a warehouse for that bustling town marketplace of yore—had no functioning elevator. Just inside the lobby—open to the public even though post boxes were just inside (not a safe place for Amazon's or other deliveries to be sure)—they'd need energy to climb the five flights of dark stairs.

"Maybe Max keeps in shape by climbing these stairs several times per day?" Christy asked.

"He probably only sleeps here."

They managed the climb. Snyder's flat was one of four on his floor. Ben put his ear to the door. Even though Snyder was still in interrogation at the police station, Ben was still cautious: Snyder might share the flat with someone.

"Not a sound. He most likely lives alone. I think it's safe to go inside."

"We have no keys," Christy said.

"Who needs keys?" Ben took a leather kit from his coat pocket. "The locks here are so old that we'll be inside in a flash."

"That's illegal."

He stared at her. "We're here to search an assassin's flat—I repeat, my lady, an assassin's flat—and you're worried about doing something a bit illegal? C'mon hen! Stevenson needs a warrant; I don't. And we're not going to steal anything. We're just looking for evidence against this Max Snyder. Something the good inspector hasn't done because he doesn't have that warrant yet."

"Okay, do it then. It's probably the only way we'll learn anything. Otherwise, he'll just be saying 'no comment' forever and then return here to destroy any evidence."

"That's my girl!"

"I'm not your girl!" She smiled at him, though. "Yet. I need to know if there's something beyond your naked lust."

"Um, and yours? I'll have to remember that line for my writing. Hell, hen, I was like a feekin' hero running towards that shooter that was standing right in front of you. He could have killed you and me as well."

"Oh, please. He wanted to kill Arthur Kent, not one of us. And he was in the wind by the time you got to me."

"So, I'm not committed enough because I can't run like Usain Bolt?"

"Who's Usain Bolt? Some Marvel superhero?"

"Never mind." Ben opened his kit, selected his tools, and went to his knees. "Ta-da!" he said a few seconds later as he flung the door open.

Christy stuck her head in. "We need PPE! What a tip!"

“Get inside. We don’t want the whole building to know we’re breaking in.” He closed the door behind him. “Now you can see what a neat freak your new boyfriend is. My caravan could look as bad as this if I were Max Snyder.”

“I’ll remind you that your little caravan isn’t so orderly now. Mr. Snyder obviously has no problem bringing the slum that’s outside inside to his flat. I don’t know where to start our search because I’m hesitant about touching anything.”

“I have just what you need.” He pulled three pairs of rubber gloves from his other coat pocket, handed a pair to her, kept one for himself, and put the other one back. “Good for not leaving fingerprints too. I’ll have to replenish my supply.”

“Is burglary your hobby, Ben?”

“I told you before: It’s investigative journalism. Let’s look for evidence, hen.” He started walking around, kicking aside old newspapers, takeaway bags and cartons, and other refuse. He stopped to study an old magazine. “Would you look at this plastic surgeon’s victim!”

Christy looked over his shoulder. “She’ll most likely have a short life filled with back pain...and there’ll be a lot more there to sag when she’s fifty.”

“And she won’t be fondled by this bloke. No way. I don’t like gelcaps, Nurse Christy, let alone gelbreasts. Snyder must live alone here. No hen would put up with his porn, let alone his mess.”

Christy had begun to go through a drawer in a cupboard filled with a few receipts and a lot of unpaid bills. “A bit behind in his payments as well. Maybe being an assassin doesn’t pay that well?”

“Don’t joke about that. I’m betting he shot poor Mrs. Delgado just for the fun of it. Someone needs to wring his neck...slowly.”

“Aha! Here’s a name and number. Sally? That’s a woman’s name. The Jag’s passenger?”

“Kind of generic. Could be an alias. Shall I call?”

Christy shook her head in the negative. “Let me. I can pretend to be calling from the hospital.”

“Your personal mobile number won’t correspond. Let me call. I’ll pretend I have the wrong number if she asks.” Before she could stop him, he’d made the call.

“*Hercules Limited*. Ms. Brock isn’t in at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?”

“Sorry. Wrong number.”

“That’s where Arthur is negotiating that deal,” Christy said in a whisper.

“We have to tell Inspector Stevenson.”

At that moment, they both heard steps and then keys rattling in the door.

Chapter Thirteen

“Where’s Max?”

Caught in the act, Christy and Ben didn’t know what to say. He nodded to her as a way of saying that this was the the woman from the Jag. She didn’t have red hair, though.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” The woman took from her bag a small pistol and waved it at them. “I know you two! You’re from the park.”

Ben bowed. “At your service, madam. Name’s Ben Alderman. This is Christy Dowd. I’ll ask you the same question: Who the hell are you, and what are you doing here? Max’s moving and we offered to take on his lease for the flat.”

The intruder considered that lie. She pointed the gun at Christy. “Is that correct?” Christy nodded. “Um, I don’t believe you.” She now pointed the gun at Ben. “I know you were at that park. You were standing next to Kim’s Jaguar.”

“Okay, I’ll admit I was there. I’m Max’s backup sometimes. Christy wasn’t at the park. You can let her go.”

Now the woman took glasses from her purse, put them on, and studied Christy. Ben could see the doubt in her eyes despite her thick lenses.

She shrugged. “She’s seen me now. We’ll have to get rid of her. Better said, you’ll have to get rid of her, Mr. Alderman.” She smiled. “Take her into Max’s bedroom and strangle her or something. He’ll get the blame if you make it look like Max likes it a bit rough. I’ll kill Max later, but now I need to find something.”

Apparently, this woman had bought Ben’s story about being Snyder’s accomplice, or at least considered the possibility that it was true. But why she’d think he’d kill his girlfriend showed that she was completely insane!

Christy nodded at Ben. His last time on stage had been at school in a Christmas scene where he’d played one of the Magi and said absolutely nothing. But she helped it seem real.

He frog-walked her as she struggled against him and bashed him until he pushed her down on the single bed.

“That hurt!” he whispered to her.

“Maybe you deserved it. What are we going to do?” she whispered back, mostly ignoring his complaint.

He pointed to the window. “Fire escape. I saw it before.”

They might have exited through the window faster than Usain Bolt would have. Unfortunately, the wild woman heard the fire escape’s last ladder when it hit the alley’s cobblestone pavement.

They hid behind a rubbish bin until her little gun ran out of bullets.

“She’s a terrible shot,” Christy observed.

Ben made no comment because he was frantically dialing nine-nine-nine. Within minutes, a patrol car pulled into the far end of the alleyway.

“That was fast,” Ben said.

The two PCs in the patrol car accompanied them back to Snyder’s flat even though Ben had insisted they call for an ARU. *That crazy woman could reload the pistol, couldn’t she?*

“She was looking for something,” Christy told one patrolman.

In her haste to leave, the woman had left the door wide open, so Ben hadn't had to use his tools again, something the PCs might not have liked and would increase their suspicions towards the couple.

"In this tip, you'll only find cockroaches and rats, Miss Dowd," the officer said.

Ben hadn't introduced themselves to the officers like he had to the crazy-bitch lady, using Stevenson's name instead: "Inspector Stevenson knows us."

"You were already on your way here, weren't you?"

"Inspector Stevenson wanted us to secure this flat while he waited for a judge to sign a warrant. You were lucky that woman wasn't a better shot."

"Who is she?" Ben said, although he thought he knew some of the answer. "Besides being the dragon lady in the Jag at the park shooting, I mean."

"Hell if I know. We were sent to stand guard here until SOCOs arrived. That's all. Speaking of which, I'd better report in and let them know what happened."

That officer went outside the flat to the stair landing to make his call in private. His companion shook his head.

"You two were very lucky," he repeated.

Ben shrugged. "As the man said, she wasn't a good shot. Probably why she hired Max Snyder to do the shooting."

"I wonder what she was looking for," Christy said.

"Max has something he shouldn't have that incriminates her?" Ben said.

"Besides the porn?" said the officer, picking up the same old magazine Ben had found. "I'm guessing he didn't produce this, though."

"Must be lonely being an assassin," Ben said with a leering smile.

"What? Snyder's an assassin?"

While Christy distracted the officer by telling him all about the case—something that might irritate Stevenson, as if she cared—she made little hand gestures to Ben. He got the message: He began searching for anything that Snyder had in his flat that might implicate the wild woman and prove what they'd already guessed, that she worked for *Hercules Limited*.

And he found it just in time: A business card in the drawer of an old-fashioned telephone stand.

"Say there, Mr. Alderman, you shouldn't be walking around and snooping. We need to let the professionals do it."

He was talking about SOCOs. "Do you mean looking for forensics evidence?"

"Yes, whatever. We're supposed to secure this flat." He laughed. "For the SOCOs...and then maybe an exterminator?"

Chapter Fourteen

“What did you find?” Christy asked afterwards as they walked to Ben’s car. He gave her the card; she read, “Sally Brock, CFO. *Hercules Limited*.” She frowned. “If she’s also the passenger in the Jaguar, what’s her motive for trying to kill poor Mr. Kent?”

“One, Mr. Kent’s probably not poor. Two, he wants to buy *Hercules*. Or at least have controlling interest.”

“Those aren’t motives.”

He shrugged. “Maybe our bad-shooting Ms. Brock has a better buyer? VIPs in *Hercules* might get a better deal from some firm other than *Security Services*? What the hell do I know? I’m not sure she’s the same woman from the Jaguar, although I suppose she could have been wearing a wig. In fact, that makes sense, doesn’t it? Is her normal hair short enough to make that work?”

“I think so. I was busy acting like your victim, remember. And then dodging bullets. Who would have thought that being a damn investigative reporter could be so dangerous?”

“Just remember that *Wall Street Journal* reporter that Putin accused of spying. Russia under that evil man isn’t a place I’ll be visiting anytime soon...like never! Investigative journalism in the UK can’t compete with doing it in Russia.”

“Except that it can kill us with bullets here if not Novichok. Max Snyder missed a bet by not working for the SVR. At least he’d have plenty of umbrellas for Putin’s poison by living in this climate.”

“Um, you’re just full of quips to remember, hen. Who’s this?”

A car pulled alongside Ben’s as he and Christy were about to get in. The window went down and Ed Stevenson’s head came out. Tim Wells was driving.

“Where are you two going?” the inspector said.

Christy had rolled down her window. “To celebrate a bit,” she said. “For surviving another shooting.”

“That problem can often occur if you go somewhere you’re not supposed to be.”

“We’re a constitutional monarchy aka democracy last time I checked,” Ben said, leaning across Christy. “We’re free to go anywhere we like.”

“Maybe to the gaol for obstructing justice? Where are you two really headed? Did you find anything at Snyder’s place?”

“Only that woman from the Jaguar,” Christy said. “She tried to kill us.”

“I heard all about that. FYI: She’s connected to Snyder, not Kim. We believe she hired Snyder.”

“Because she’s such a poor shot?”

“Aye, she’s no assassin; Snyder is that. We’ll nick her soon enough. Stay out of it, you two. I say that for the last time. I can’t be worried about you two all the time and still do my job.”

“That’s sweet of you, Inspector. But what occurred here—I mean, in Snyder’s flat—shows that you can’t protect us. Let’s go, Ben.”

But he couldn’t. The police car was faced in the opposite direction to Ben’s and was blocking his departure from the curb. He and the inspector glared at each other for a moment, but then Ed motioned to Tim to move on.

“Can he do that?” Christy said as Ben pulled away from the curb. “Arrest us for obstructing justice? I could lose my job!”

“I see your point. We’re heading for *Hercules* HQ, but I’ll go in alone. You can stay in the car. I want to see if Sally Brock is there.”

“And if she is? And she’s the woman from Snyder’s flat?”

“I’ll call Stevenson. Then I’ll try to make a citizen’s arrest.”

“Is there such a thing in the UK?”

“If not, there should be.”

“Maybe just in old police dramas rerun on the telly. And how are you going to manage it? She’s probably reloaded that damn toy pistol of hers by now.”

“If she’s the same woman, yes, that could be the case. But she wouldn’t dare shoot me at her workplace in front of a bunch of witnesses, would she?”

“Why not?”

“Um, she’s such a bad shot that she might end up killing her boss, the poor man, whoever he is.”

“Probably involved in this whole mess as well—that’s who he is. And a few meters away is a lot closer than fifteen or twenty or whatever was the distance from the flat to that alleyway. That’s ignoring collaborators she might have at the firm.”

“Um, so what do you suggest, Miss Battle Manager?”

“Confirm she’s there and then tell the inspector.”

“And how do we do the first? It avoids my citizen’s arrest, but isn’t it the same problem?”

“We can call Arthur Kent. Superman can tell us if she’s present.”

“Superman’s old uncle maybe. But that’s brilliant, Christy. Keeps us safe but me close enough to the action. I’ll park near *Hercules*’s office, and we’ll call Kent from there.”

“Why so close? She could leave the building and come after us again.”

“To get a first-hand account of what goes down. A follow-up to my article!”

She thought a moment. “Okay. Sounds safe enough—a lot better than what occurred at Snyder’s flat, in any case.”

Arthur Kent was sitting alone when Ben called. He was facing the CEO, CFO, two of their lawyers, and a few other lesser-ranked employees from *Hercules*.

He didn’t recognize the number, but he feared it might be his New York office calling for an update. He’d just upped their offer because Sally and the CEO were insisting on a larger number of shares when the companies were combined. Ed’s controlling percentage would be reduced to fifty-one percent. *Is the deal still worth it?* He thought so. So had New York. *But have the people back home changed their minds?*

So he answered his mobile.

“Ben Alderman here, Arthur. Is Sally Brock present at your meeting? Just say yes or no.”

Arthur was looking straight at Sally, but Ben’s tone made him agree to be a bit circumspect. “Yes,” he said.

“Then keep her occupied. I’m sending the police. Do you understand? Yes or no?”

“Yes.” He smiled and winked at Sally, covered his mouth, and whispered “New York” to those on the other side of the table. She and the CEO nodded. The others seemed bored.

“I’ll be waiting.” He closed the connection. “Maybe we should take a little break? They might go for your counteroffer.”

All the *Hercules* people now smiled.

“Ten-minute break?” Sally said to the CEO, who simply nodded.

“We’re making progress,” Sally told Arthur once they were in her office with coffee and tea sorted.

He shrugged. “Frankly, *Hercules*, that is, you and your people, is responsible for the delay. You folks hedged at the last moment when we thought our proposal had been accepted. Why I was here in England, as a matter of fact.”

“I know, I know. And that shooting in the park complicated things too.”

“The police are still trying to sort all that.”

They relaxed a bit, Sally with her tea and Arthur with his coffee. He had no idea what she was thinking after the conversation with Ben. She’d be worried if she knew his thoughts, though. And he was reliving that shooting in the park!

“What’s the latest news from that idiot Stevenson?” Sally finally said.

The door to her office was flung open. “That you’re under arrest, Miss Brock!” Ed Stevenson said.

The inspector’s accompanying PC quickly put Sally Brock into handcuffs.

“Tis curious,” he said after giving a nod to the PC, who had been gentle. *Maybe too gentle?* “When some of your colleagues saw my officers’ uniforms, they scarpered. We’ll be collecting them soon enough for our interrogations. Are you okay, Arthur?”

Arthur Kent nodded. “Just peachy. I suppose in good time you’ll explain what has just occurred. What will happen now?”

Ed shrugged but correctly interpreted the question. “Maybe your company should make a deal with someone else besides *Hercules*?”

Chapter Fifteen

One month later...

“I suppose you’re going to write more about the case?” Ed said, winking at Tim, who was content sipping his half-lager.

It was early in the afternoon, so the pub was quiet. Ben’s arm was possessively wrapped around Christy’s shoulders, but the nurse didn’t object. They were having something like a celebration, more for the couple’s engagement than anything else, hence the invitation to the coppers since they’d helped bring the couple together, in a manner of speaking.

The end of the case involving the shooting at the park was also part of the celebration, though. The charges against the particular criminals involved had been presented to the Crown Prosecution Service; that officially ended police involvement and the couple’s participation in the complex case except for their testimony at a trial and put it in the hands of lawyers.

“I must do that,” Ben said. “I’m under contract now to follow the case to the bitter end and write all about it.”

“Said end being Max Snyder convicted of murder and attempted murder; Sally “Cruella” Brock of accessory to attempted murder and several counts of attempted fraud, along with several of her colleagues from *Hercules*, including the CEO; Kim for multiple accessories; and crippling fines for *Hercules Limited* itself.” Tim smiled at his audience as he tapped his head. “I’m Inspector Stevenson’s portable hard disk.”

“And yet another pain in my neck,” Ed said, although his smile lessened the sting of his words.

“What’s happened to Arthur and his company?” Christy said. “He seemed like such a nice man.”

“They’ll probably get an even better deal,” Ed said. “They’re negotiating with two firms, French and German. Arthur had talked with them previously.” He eyed Christy. “And when will the wedding be, Miss Dowd.”

“I’ve asked to be transferred from the ER to the pediatric unit to better match my training. I hope that doesn’t disappoint you, Inspector Stevenson. I need a favor from you, though.”

“And here I thought I was done with you two. What favor could that be?”

“I need someone to walk me down the aisle. It’s not appropriate for Ben to do it, since he’ll be the groom, you know, and Tim’s his best man. Would you be my surrogate father?”

“I’d be honored...as long as it doesn’t put me in the line of fire. You two have a habit of being there.”

“No guns will be allowed,” Ben said. “Only that damned rice.”

The Viking's Axe

SAMPLE

Principal Characters

Edwin Berg—student at the boys school
Judy Bixby—headmaster of the boys school
Ian Burns—Edinburgh PD Detective Sergeant
Karen Crane—Edinburgh PD Detective Constable
Christine “Christy” MacDonald—Professor of Archaeology and History at Edinburgh U
Adrian McIver—Professor of Archaeology at Dundee U
Angus McLeod—collector of antiquities [maybe not principal?]
Martin Meadows—Edinburgh PD Detective Inspector
Linda Mullins—Archaeology Department secretary at Edinburgh U
Boris Pavlovic—the victim, a professor at a boys school
Abigail Pitcher—secretary at the boys school
Andy Simms—student at the boys school
Lachlan Stuart—a collector and an assassin
Lilith Stuart—a collector and a victim
Roger Hazleton—the butler
Leonard Whittaker—Newcastle PD DCI

Prologue

Only rage gave him enough energy to swing the battle axe like some Viking warrior and end his pleading victim's life. He exhaled deeply as he stared at the dead body. His victim hadn't even had the time to put up his arms in a feeble attempt to fend off that vicious downward arc.

The assassin tossed the axe by the body. Killing this man was a disgusting thing to do, even though the wanker well deserved it. His wife had violated the ancient marriage vows and paid with her own life earlier. Her lover had needed to die as well. That was the ancient tradition dictated by the ancient Norse gods' laws that bound a man and woman in holy matrimony. Those laws had to be respected until one of the partners died.

The gods wouldn't punish him for what he'd done. He'd obeyed their commands. He might have to be a bit cleverer with the local police, though.

SAMPLE

Chapter One

“There’s a visitor here in the lobby who wants to chat with you, Professor MacDonald. He’s come with an axe. Should I allow him to go up?”

Christy MacDonald hesitated to give her answer. A person with an axe could be part of that fanatical fringe group on the university’s campus that was currently protesting against Scottish independence—as if that would ever occur! Edinburgh University had been under siege and in lockdown for nearly a week. Of course, it could also mean the visitor wanted to make a legitimate consultation about some relic that had been found. That more commonly occurred.

“Does the axe look ancient?”

“’Tis all wrapped up, Professor. But from what I can see, yes.”

“Have him partially unwrap it to be sure.”

Even over the protestors’ distant but loud chants, often amplified by megaphones, she could hear the rustling-paper noises. And were there now competing ones in favor of independence? That wouldn’t be a surprise. Independence was still a controversial issue! In any case, it was interesting how only a few students could make so much noise!

“He says it might be a battle axe. Looks old to me. Can’t say it’d be very useful in a battle, though. Or of use against students. Looks very heavy.”

“Allow him to come up. I’m curious. Thanks for screening him, Jock.”

A few minutes later, there was a knock on her office door’s windowpane.

After the hiring of new security guards for the lobby, the department chairman had made her little academic group give up the receptionist they’d all shared: Linda Mullins had become senior secretary in the department’s pool that the chairman controlled, supposedly to increase efficiency. Christy suspected that his main motivation had been to have a senior worker tending to his every need. She also suspected that the extra security hadn’t really been needed: The Irish woman would have been able to easily handle any rowdy students by herself—she was a tough old bird!—but the chairman often worried about lawsuits being filed against the university for workers attacked by students...or vice versa, not that Linda would resort to anything more than verbal thrashings.

“Come in,” Christy said. “Ian?”

“I was right,” said Ian Burns. “’Tis my best old school chum Christine, now formally known as the honorable Professor MacDonald.” In one hand, he had the axe in question, part of its wrapper almost dragging on the floor; the other hand waved some kind of documentation. “Detective Sergeant Ian Burns from Edinburgh PD, at your service Professor, here to ask you if this object is an authentic battle axe.” He placed it on her desk and pulled up a chair.

“May I remove the rest of the wrapper?”

“Be my guest, hen. The forensics blokes have already gone over it, looking for whatever they look for: Fingerprints, blood residue, even DNA these days. I suggested to my old DI that we find out what we’ve got here besides it being a very strange murder weapon.”

Christy blanched. “Murder? This axe killed someone?”

“No, someone yielding it did the killing. Split a poor blokes head open like a ripe melon.”

She became paler. “Are you taking the Mickey?”

“Nae, lovely lady. ‘Twas our murder weapon, I can assure you. My question is: Who’d have such a weapon lying around ready to be used to commit murder? I thought someone steeped in the history of Scottish clans and border skirmishes with the English might know the answer, so I came here.”

“Um, I agree that I might be qualified in that regard,” she said with a nervous smile, “but that axe has nothing to do with clan warfare, Ian, past or present.”

“No current MacDonalds to serve as suspects?”

“And no Burns, Robert or later. This weapon is a Viking’s battle axe. An old one, to be honest, but it would have been used by a Viking invader.”

“So, should we be looking for a collector of Viking artifacts?”

“I’m at a disadvantage there. As much as I’d prefer to avoid it, can you tell me about the crime scene?”

“There’s a country lane off M8 with a drainage ditch running alongside. Can’t be more explicit without a map. The victim was found in that ditch. Quite the crime scene, I dare say. One of our young PCs lost her breakfast, ‘twas such a gory sight.”

“Understandable.” Her own body might require a dose of paracetamol as well. “Could it be a ritual killing that was acted out? An attacker with Viking heritage going after a bloke with Scottish ancestry?”

“Um, ‘tis a bit too medieval of a theory, isn’t it? The victim’s a Slavic bloke named Boris Pavlovic, once resident of Newcastle.”

“This Mr. Pavlovic, what was he doing here in Scotland?”

“We’re in the process of determining that. If he’d been Swedish or Norwegian, we might call it a modern hate crime harking back to ancient times, right?” She nodded. “But Slavic?” His mobile’s ringtone sounded. “Excuse me, Professor.” He studied a text message. “Boris Pavlovic is a Serbian immigrant who teaches Russian at a boy’s school not far from where we found him. In this area, not Newcastle’s. This case is becoming more complex.”

Christy thought that was an understatement, especially from her point of view. “The interesting question remains: Where did his killer get the axe? And here’s a second and related one: Why use an ancient axe? It’s not really a discreet weapon that’s easily concealed. Wouldn’t a knife have been a better weapon?”

“Or a gun? Agreed.”

“There must be some ritual meaning lurking in the background. What did this Boris do back in Serbia? He wouldn’t be teaching Russian there, would he?”

“We’ll have to find that out.” Ian stood. “It was good to see you again, Christy, but I’ve taken too much of your time.”

She looked at her watch. “Actually, I’m a creature of habit, and it’s time for my break. Would you like to give me company to have tea and biscuits?”

“Sounds very English and posh, but I don’t mind if I do. That will postpone my encounter with my old DI and his usual ‘I told you so.’ He’s a good detective, but he can be a surly bastard too.”

“You can tell me all about it over tea and biscuits. And about what you’ve been doing in your life all these years since we last saw each other.”

In sixth, Christy MacDonald had dated Ian Burns a few times before graduation sent them off in different directions. Her attraction to the brilliant lad everyone predicted was going to be a famous engineer or scientist someday hadn’t been because of his brains, the pudgy rugby player’s skills on the pitch, or his ability to explain difficult geometrical concepts to her where he’d been a tremendous help. She wasn’t sure what the attraction had been. He’d failed to provide what she’d most desired, though, so that had ended the budding romance: She’d lost her virginity with someone else because Ian had been too shy. Had he now outgrown that shyness?

Or was his politeness now as a police officer just more of the same shyness? That certainly wouldn't be appropriate for his job!

Unfortunately, Arthur Langston interrupted their nostalgic time-travel into their past lives. The annoying archaeologist's macho posturing was often directed at Christy. Fortunately, he couldn't join her and Ian because they were seated at a table for two. Also fortunately, Arthur spotted Debra Trent, a history professor, another single female he often targeted.

"That bloke's sweet on you, hen," Ian told Christy after Arthur left their vicinity. "Plays the field, though."

"These days I only seem to attract losers. I might have to steal some other woman's husband." Her smile should tell this observant detective that she was only joking. "Have you had any success since our time in sixth?"

He shrugged. "Joined the army, got married afterwards, had a bairn, got divorced. Main problem: Who'd want a relationship with a plod who already has a child? Women today often don't want to be tied down like that; my wife didn't either, to be honest. She and her new man now run a pub in Dundee."

Because that story was sadder than her own, Christy didn't know what to say. She tried, "I had no idea you enlisted."

"One tour in Afghanistan was all I could stomach. No PTSD, though, thank goodness. And now I can outshoot anyone in our CID, including my DI, much to his embarrassment. So, there are positives. And my son Bobby keeps me sane. Oh, and we have a cat and dog. Full cottage for us, and always busy. I've a jewel of a housekeeper, Mrs. MacDougall. She gives the wee bairn his snack when he gets off the school bus. A surrogate nana, she is."

Christy thought that had a sad flavor to it also. The poor fellow was taking care of everyone else's needs, but what about his? "Your parents are gone?"

"Pa's in a nursing home with dementia, and the big C took Mum. They only knew Bobby as a baby."

Bobby Burns? She wondered if he'd become a writer. "And you have a DI who sends you out to find what kind of axe your murderer used? That dinnae sound exciting even to me, and it touches my field."

"'Tis a job. Sometimes with fringe benefits. Here I be having tea and biscuits with a lovely lady like I'm some English toff."

She couldn't completely halt the blush. "Speaking of Dundee, when we return to my office, let me take some pictures of that battle axe with my mobile. There's an old professor up there who's one of the leading experts on the Viking presence in Northumberland and Scotland. He just might be able to tell us where that axe came from."

"And who the crazy people are that collect artifacts like that?" She nodded. "I'd appreciate that."

"Seems like that's what you need to know. Any collector could be a suspect."

"Aye, Dr. Watson. An obvious suspect he'd be. Or she'd be."

"Do you think your killer could be a woman?"

"That axe is heavy enough that once someone starts a swing, that weapon would finish the job. You wouldn't be able to stop it. The trick is to lift it to begin with. Maybe a lot of rage needed."

She could only nod again.

Chapter Two

DI Martin Meadows looked up from his paper-strewn desk when his sergeant rapped on his door jamb. He'd always insisted on an open-door policy for his CID team members, but woe be onto anyone who wasted his time. And he seemed to dislike Ian Burns more than most, although the lad had shown some brilliance at times and was a good, steady, and all-around investigator in general. Of course, the Englishman, from Durham originally and most recently from the Newcastle Constabulary, disliked most Scots, although he'd never admit to that, so Ian was just one of many around and probably less obnoxious than most.

People on the border between Edinburgh and Glasgow often felt the same about the English, that feeling most openly expressed in their pageantry—every damned town there seemed to commemorate some sort of battle between English and Scotch warriors that took place long ago, whether the Scots had won or lost. He felt they were just excuses to get bloated and gorge themselves. And those damned pipes! How he hated them! Even a wedding, hopefully a happier event, seemed like a funeral.

Meadows had come to Edinburgh PD shortly after the 2013 reform when Scotland's chaos of city and town constabularies had created even more bureaucracy by becoming Police Scotland, trying mightily to copy England and Wales's organizations but largely failing, like Northern Ireland's. He'd stayed the course, though, and there had occurred some modernization in methods, with some positive reorganization, along with the additional bureaucracy.

His transfer, probably the better choice of the ones available to him at the time, had supposedly been a promotion; it had turned out to be a dead end instead. He now felt he'd been passed over too many times for further promotion, so he'd most likely still retire as a detective inspector. Higher-ups would insist that it wasn't for his performance; that had been sterling over the years. He was also a good, solid detective who made those higher-ups look good as well, and he gave accolades when due to his team members. He didn't think the reason was the Scots' distrust of the English either but more because he was always all business. Policing was his whole life, so much so that he never had anyone to share it with. He envied Burns because the lad had a family to go home to.

"Waste of time there at the university, Burns?"

"Um, not completely. One, 'tis an authentic artifact, but it's a Viking battle axe. Two, the professor with whom I consulted knows another expert in Dundee who might point us to some collectors of Viking artifacts."

"What good will that do?"

"Our consultant at the university and I had the same idea: A collector would be a logical suspect. Or, he might have had that battle axe stolen from his collection. Just some ideas sir."

"Um, I suppose that's all worth looking into. I'd rather you find out more about our victim. Can you do both?" Meadows was sure which one Ian preferred. His sergeant was curious about too many things. Martin called it being unfocused.

"Aye. You want me to find out why someone wanted to kill old Boris, I presume." Meadows nodded. "I can do that. Professor MacDonald will need some time to contact and query that Dundee professor. Is anyone interviewing the other professors at that boys school?"

"I was going to do that with DC Crane." He looked at his watch. "Leaving in ten, in fact."

Karen Crane was the newest member of the CID team. Ian had heard some gossip, not verified, that Meadows was stalking her. He had the reputation for doing that, even with uniformed police, WPSs and WPCs. As Meadows's sergeant, Ian hadn't seen that sort of

transgression, but Meadows treated the female team members better than the males while at the same time encouraging both to become better coppers. He was particularly hard on Ian, but the sergeant didn't much care. He didn't need a promotion, and he and Bobby had each other and were just fine.

That last thought made him realize, though, that seeing Christy MacDonald again had shown him a road not yet traveled into the future. *But does the professor even like children?*

"They can't all make it," DC Karen Crane said as she backed into a space in the boys school's small car park. "But we'll be able to interview most of them."

During the trip from the nick, she and Meadows had been discussing how to interrogate professors and staff at the school. He smiled. "We'll focus on the VIPs first," he said. "You can distract the old farts and make enemies of the female professors by showing a bit of leg while I give them a watered-down version of the Spanish Inquisition."

She smiled back. "So, I'll flush out the prey and you'll pounce?" He nodded. "That's not the way a lions' pride works sir. The female does the pouncing."

"That's the way a wolfpack works, and because it's a boys school, I'm betting they'll be mostly males except for a few staff members. And the headmaster's probably the alpha male of the pack."

Crane had to hide her smile when they discovered that the headmaster was a woman, a severe, older lady but still a female. Her second in the school's hierarchy was a young bloke; his boss sent him for tea service and then took her seat behind her desk again.

"I assure you, officers, that like all the professors here, Boris Pavlovic was a capable and honorable man. Moreover, everyone liked him."

Considering the headmaster's age, Crane thought that she might consider Pavlovic more than a colleague. *Prey maybe?*

"We have only minimal information about his background," Meadows said. "What else can you tell us about him? Please include anything that you know about his life in Serbia."

Judy Bixby took time to gather her thoughts, long enough to make Meadows fear they were going to get a biography that would be more like *Silas Marner* on steroids in its wordy details—how he'd hated that book as a schoolboy. Only *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Les Misérables* had been worse.

"I don't know all that much about Boris's past, Inspector. He emigrated to England after that terrible war there in the old Yugoslavia, He was a young adult himself during it. I'm guessing he saw many atrocities. After coming here, he managed to get into Oxford. He was quite the polyglot, so his study of modern European languages there was a logical choice. He spoke several beyond his native one. Many of our compatriots can't even master English."

"Or Scotch Gaelic," Meadows said. "Besides Russian, did he teach any other languages here?"

"He occasionally substituted for the French, German, and Italian professors as needed. Otherwise, we couldn't have hired him. So, few of our students take Russian."

"Sad to hear that. I always say that we must know our enemies. I suppose it's a difficult language to learn?"

"According to Boris, that's not true. Unlike English, it's mostly phonetic. Unfortunately, like German, it has declensions, six compared to German's four."

Meadows shrugged. "I'm not a polyglot, Dr. Bixby. In fact, I'm an Englishman who has some problems with English, mostly with the dialects, I believe you call them? Cockney, Geordie, Welsh—and we complain about the Yanks with their Boston and Texas accents."

"Welsh isn't a dialect," Bixby said. "It's a Gaelic language as well. So I'm told. But our other three languages in the UK, Irish, Scotch Gaelic, and Welsh, do lead to strong brogues sometimes. But, to return to Boris and his superb language skills, I often felt they were wasted. We only offer two years of Russian, at fifth and sixth. Most students meet their language requirements with other languages."

"Perhaps something else kept him here?" Crane said. "Family? Girlfriend? Business interest on the side?"

"You should ask other professors about that. I have no information one way or the other. And maybe he just liked Scotland? I don't know that part of Europe he once called home at all, but maybe our rolling hills, lochs, and rivers reminded him of his homeland." Crane nodded. "Abby Pitcher might be the person to query. She's one of our secretaries and socialized with Boris a few times. Probably too many years between those two, I dare say, but he was quite the gentleman. Yes, if anyone were to know more about Boris, she'd be the one."

Unfortunately, Abigail Pitcher had already left for the day because of a dentist appointment. The two officers talked to a few more professors and then called it a day themselves.

Chapter Three

Ian's first visit was to the Serbian consulate. While waiting for the consul, he reviewed some Serbian history on his smart phone, from the country's creation after the chaos in Yugoslavia created by Tito's death to the present, mostly because Boris Pavlovic had emigrated to Scotland from there at war's end. He spent almost an hour before and after the meeting with the consul, a duration longer than the few minutes he'd spent with the diplomat.

"I met him only at a few functions," the consul said. He was a jowly bloke with beady eyes peeping out from folds of fat. He had a Santa Claus-like figure but lacked the ho-hos; he never smiled once. "We have a full staff at the embassy in London. Here my title is consul, but I'm also the Serbian cultural and scientific attaches and the poor bloke who must solve problems like lost passports and issuing visas for Serbian tourists and anyone else who's coming or going to our country. I'm lucky to even have a receptionist here who works half days." He glanced at his watch. "And now I must go have a chat with the Italian consul. Walk with me to the car park if you have some quick questions I can attempt to answer."

"Just one: When Mr. Pavlovic arrived here in the UK, was it with the blessing of the Serbian government?"

"If you're asking if he had a legitimate visa, the answer's yes. Was he considered a traitor? I'd say no, but he wasn't exactly a war hero either no matter what side you're coming from. But don't you think it's natural for a young man to run away from that chaos to try to make a better life somewhere else?"

"Aye, I would think that." They were now standing beside the consul's vehicle, a small EV model. Ian held out his hand to shake. "One more question, if I may?"

"Your last one. I'm already late."

"Do you have any idea why someone would want to kill Mr. Pavlovic?"

"No. I'd even forgotten his name until your call. You're not thinking there's some relationship with war crimes, are you?"

"I have no information that would cause me to think anything in particular. I suppose the Hague has already taken care of all the war criminals, though. Am I wrong?"

The consul shrugged. "Inspector Burns, I'm twenty years younger than Pavlovic. My generation has moved on and looks towards Serbia's future now. Moreover, we try to forget about its terrible past, especially Mr. Tito's role in it. Most countries that were behind the Iron Curtain would be wise to do the same."

Ian sat in his own car for a few moments to gather his thoughts. The consul's remarks about war crimes still niggled at his mind. Although some people would want the word reserved for what the Nazis did to the Jews and others during an earlier war, he knew that "genocide" was a composite of two different words, "genos" meaning people and "cide" meaning killing or murder, so it was a more general term and meant the killing or murder of many people. That had occurred all too often during the chaos after Tito's death in Yugoslavia.

That was why he decided to study what had happened there a bit more. It seemed to him that there might still be a lot of rancor that remained smoldering in the minds of the different factions that had once been involved in the violence. Was the situation something like that between the English and Irish or the Kurds and Turks?

His thoughts were eventually interrupted by his ringtone. Professor McIver from Dundee turned out to be in the Edinburgh area. Christy had invited him to dinner. Could Ian join them?

Ian said yes, got the address and time, and then headed for the university library to do a bit more research. He killed some time there, losing himself in his subject, but he still managed to leave enough time to stop by the nick and pick up the Viking's axe. That took a bit more time than expected, though—he had to sign it out from the evidence trove—so he was late arriving at Christy's flat, but only by ten minutes.

"Sorry I'm late. It's a ride from the university to here, and I wanted to bring the axe."

"I'm glad you did. Professor McIver is already here."

He followed her down the short entrance hall and into her sitting room—the axe on his shoulder as if he were an old Viking warrior who'd left his horned helmet on a peg at the entrance door upon entering—and he met the old professor, a larger man who appeared more like the axe's rightful owner.

"Professor, this is Detective Sergeant Ian Burns, whom I mentioned. Ian, Adrian McIver, Professor of Archaeology from Dundee University."

The two men shook hands and, like good Scots, took each one's measure before sitting down. Ian had concluded that the professor reminded him of Christy's father, whom Ian had met many times; or rather, how her father might have looked if he were still among the living.

Christy had taken the smallest chair in her parlor so that the big men would be more comfortable in some wingchairs. Ian rose and handed the axe to the professor. "The artifact in question," Ian announced. It was now wrapped in plastic.

"Can I unwrap it?" McIver said after Ian sat again.

"Yes sir. This murder weapon has been studied thoroughly and tested in every way possible using modern forensics science. Christy, that is, Professor MacDonald, and I decided that any local collector of Viking artifacts might be missing it from his collection, and that might tell us something. I'm not sure exactly what."

"Provenance at least. And maybe that collector is the guilty party?"

Ian shrugged and smiled. "That will be considered as well. I have an aunt, though, who collects ancient crossbows. She wouldn't hurt a living thing, though, plant or animal."

It was McIver's turn to smile. "You're quite right to be doubtful about collectors being evil merchants of death. They're usually more like twitchers: A bit fanatical about what they're collecting but basically harmless otherwise." He finished unwrapping the axe and began to study it closely. "'Tis indeed an ancient Viking battle axe." He winked at Christy. "My dear, your identification was correct. Congratulations. What's your guess for period?"

"I'm sure it won't be as good as yours. I'd date it to be from the early decades of the Vikings' incursions into northern England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, its owner coming from what we now call Norway or northern Denmark. The runes on the axe handle suggest that. Can you read them, Adrian?"

"No, not completely, and they're a bit faded. I've seen similar ones that were found on the west coast of England and across Northern Ireland, though. I have a few axes in my own collection. I believe the symbols are there to protect the axe's owner, particularly in battle. This one here—" He pointed to a faded marking halfway down the handle "—might represent the clan or tribe. Ancient sweaty and battle-weary hands are probably mostly responsible for the fading."

"A brute of a man would have been needed to swing that axe with one hand and arm," Ian said. "Wouldn't he have to do that, though? Wouldn't his other arm be used to carry some kind of shield?"

"A good guess but not necessarily true. The Viking marauders might fall on an unsuspecting village filled with helpless farm folk without any serious weapons among them

beyond rudimentary tools. The owner of this axe might use both hands to flail with maximum force to end the battle quickly, but no shield need be used in such circumstances.”

“Would they kill everyone in the village?” Christy said, her eyes wide.

“They might leave some alive to serve as slaves, or a few women from the favorites they’d just raped. Primitive times, my dear. War was a localized, up-close-and-personal, face-to-face affair back then, to be honest. Today we’ve modernized and depersonalized the destruction by using drones, modern artillery, surface- and air-to surface rockets, and even H-bombs.”

“Well stated, Professor McIver,” Ian said. “What about collectors of weaponry like this? Any more comments?”

“There are several around the area, ranging from serious collectors like me to dedicated amateurs who love to dig in ruins. Then there are those who raid tombs and other burial sites before either of those first groups can get to the digs. I can make a list for you of known collectors.”

“After dinner, Adrian,” Christy said. She smiled at Ian. “I’ve prepared the professor’s favorite, lamb with roasted potatoes. I hope that appeals to you.”

“Works for me,” Ian said. “Bobby and Mrs. MacDougall will be having lamb stew tonight to get him to eat his vegetables. That’s usually more mutton than lamb, though.”

After dinner but before dessert, which would be an apple pie, McIver made his list at one end of the dinner table while Christy and Ian cleared the other end. Ian then studied the list while she prepared the pie and coffee.

“These are mostly English names, not Scottish,” Ian observed.

“English with some Viking blood perhaps? And collectors aren’t necessarily only collecting because of family histories. Look at your aunt, for example.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised if she had some Norman blood that goes all the way back to 1066. But this Angus McLeod is the only Scottish name on your list. And he and our victim live near each other. Perhaps I should visit him first?”

“That’s on you, young lad. Be wary, though. I’ve met all these people, one time or the other. Angus has the worst temper of them all.”

Chapter Four

Although Professor McIver's list had seventeen names, Burns convinced Meadows to accompany him to visit Angus McLeod. And even though Burns didn't express it, he wanted the English Meadows to bear the brunt of any bursts of anger from the Scottish McLeod if McIver's reference to the man's foul temper was correct. What Ian told his DI to convince him, though, was only that the sergeant was much younger while the collector and the DI were more the same age and therefore more kindred souls. Somehow that appealed to Meadows's vanity, as Burns had known it would.

Of course, they took the battle axe with them, for simplicity, without plastic covering, and the collector fell in love with it, stroking it as if it were the soft leg of some fair maiden of yore he was about to bed. And that somehow put McLeod in a good mood, if only at first.

"'Tis from the east coast of Ireland or the west coast of England, I dare say, and it's an excellent example of a Viking's battle axe. Is it for sale?"

"It's evidence, Mr. McLeod," Meadows said. "It was used to cleave a man's head not long ago."

McLeod didn't pale at that statement; he smiled instead. "Perhaps an ancient Viking warrior's spirit possessed the assailant?"

"If you truly believe that, you should tell his legal representative to use it in his defense to see how far that goes. After we find the bastard, of course. Do you have any idea who that person might be? Another collector perhaps?"

"The axe isn't one of mine, just to be clear. I'd love to own it, though. I have a few, but they're in worse condition. I've also seen a few during my visits with other collectors, but nothing quite like this one. Do you think it was stolen from some collector?"

"Aren't you blokes like art collectors? You create collections for your own perusal, your own enjoyment, don't you? You can own things that the ordinary public can never afford to own or even see."

McLeod bristled and Burns mentally cringed. *Those words are considered an insult, DI Meadows!*

"I get your point, Inspector," snapped the collector, "but why is that any different from a bloke who shows off his new high-res telly or megawatt stereo system? And, by the way, some collectors of ancient weaponry and other artifacts are women. What we all have in common is time, money, and an interest in ancient history. My collection is probably worth more than that ex-US president's Bedminster golf club or our king's personal yacht. I can make a strong argument that it represents better value for the money as well, especially since it's my money and not the taxpayers'."

"None of the three serve the common good. The public has no access."

Now there was fire in McLeod's eyes. "And what has the general public ever done for me, Inspector? Absolutely nothing. Especially you English leeches sucking our Gaelic blood for centuries."

Uh oh, thought Ian, is an independence argument coming our way?

"That's all past, Mr. McLeod, and we're getting nowhere by going down that old road. May we see your collection?"

Now the collector smiled. His vanity had taken over again. "But of course. Follow me to the study."

That room in the ancient manse was more like the wing of some dusty and moldy museum and was filled with lots of Viking artifacts, although it wasn't always clear what some of the items had been used for; they could have just as well have been relics from a Native American village as those from a Viking one. Ian pointed at what was left of a huge longbow.

"That could do some real damage. It must take several pounds of force to draw it."

"About the same amount it would take to swing that axe of yours, lad. You'll be looking for a large, strong man as your murderer."

Meadows nodded. "Any idea who that might be?"

"I can only make a list of collectors like me for your perusal. And, like me, they'd certainly not be well suited to draw this bow or wield that axe, the latter even with both hands."

"That list would be very helpful, Mr. McLeod."

While the collector sat at his desk to create the list, the officers conferred in the hall outside the study. "We already have McIver's list," Ian whispered to his DI.

"Aye, lad. We'll compare the two and check the names common to both first. And I'm now considering some other suspects."

"Who?"

"Rugby players. They're big lads. And there might even be some on both lists."

"But aren't collectors generally old toffs?"

"A thirty-five-year-old who still plays rugby and collects Viking axes would be a prime suspect, I dare say."

Burns maintained a neutral expression with difficulty because he was thinking that with his ruggers comment, Meadows was growing senile and would soon join his father in the mental care facility. Or he was taking the piss with his sergeant.

His DI redeemed himself, though, as he drove them back to the nick. "That old toff was full of shite, you know. Bordering on sociopath, to be honest, and looking down his nose at us most of the time."

"But not a murderer?"

"No. He could barely lift that axe, lad. Prompted my idiotic comment about ruggers too. Hell, I was a rugby player. Always at the bottom of the scrum. Sort of like that now at our constabulary."

"As an Edinburgh copper, you're hardly at the bottom of the scrum, sir."

Meadows made a sharp turn from the road they were on into a car park. The pub was called *Molly's*. "That compliment deserves lifting a few ales, lad. We'll continue our task tomorrow."

The next morning, Meadows and Burns were disappointed when they compared the two lists. McLeod was the only person common to both lists, the total coming to thirty-three men and women.

"There's no way you can interview all these people," Meadows said, "even with the help of some DCs. And some of the older ones might even die before you can."

Burns nodded. "And who knows if they all have or had Viking axes in their collections?"

"Or if they had one stolen, would they report it? I have a hunch that some of these toffs' artifacts have a somewhat dubious provenance."

"Do you mean they've gotten them from grave robbers and so forth?"

Meadows shrugged. "They might even be artifacts stolen from museums or other collections. Would you ever be able to determine that in a personal interview?"

“Moot point sir. Thirty-three collectors sir: That number is our problem,”

Meadows sighed. “Here’s what you must do: Make phone calls or send text messages if no one answers. In fact, create a general text message and get a couple of uniforms to send it out to the people on the lists. We need to probe more into Boris Pavlovic’s past too. There must be someone there, or even in his present, who hated the wanker enough to murder him in that manner. That was a lot of rage, Ian.”

“I agree. I contacted Europol and Interpol; they had nothing for us. But someone knows something.”

“‘Tis always the case. But the killer must live around here. Forget the continent. That’s too far back in his past unless the bloke has travelled there recently.”

They both lapsed into thought. Burns eventually snapped his fingers. “Ex-students!”

Meadows smiled. “Or current and more recent ones still in school. My bad, sergeant! And kudos to you, lad. Yes, we need to talk to them. And someone among them could grass on someone else.”

“If you don’t mind me saying so sir, you should leave that inquiry to us younger officers. You’re likely to scare the hell out of them.”

“That might be necessary, Sergeant.”

“But let us begin it, and then call you in as needed.”

Chapter Five

The first part of their plan was easy enough to implement. Burns wrote the text message with DC Karen Crane, and Meadows edited it. Two PSs sent it out to everyone on the merged list. The rest of that part of the plan would become a waiting game.

Meanwhile, over the objections of Dr. Bixby, Karen and Ian began interviewing the boys school's students two on one, the students of Russian being their first interviewees. One of the students who hadn't taken Russian grassed a bit on one that did. Meadows and Burns interviewed him again.

"We understand that you had a few arguments with Professor Pavlovic," Meadows said to Edwin Berg, a sandy-haired, broad-shouldered six-footer. "What were those about?"

Berg shrugged. "The wanker wanted to flunk me because of my accent."

"It's an interesting one. German?"

"Austrian. But you've got it all wrong: He wasn't trying to correct my English. According to him, I couldn't get the Russian accent right."

"You have language lab once per week, correct?" Karen said.

"I'll admit that I'd developed some bad habits. I took some Russian in Vienna, you see. They taught me to speak the way they do in Leningrad. Here Pavlovic wanted us to speak like they do in Moscow. I guess I can't break the first habit."

"Seems like a trifling criticism," Meadows said.

"Not for the professor."

Ian checked the notes on his phone. "That's only ten percent of the grade in the first Russian course. There must be other reasons for you to hate Mr. Pavlovic."

Edwin glanced at Karen. "He went after my bird."

Meadows' eyebrows raised, Burns smiled, and Crane frowned.

"How did he even know who she was?" Meadows said. "You attend a boy's school."

"Abby doesn't know I'm an admirer," Edwin said, blushing. "She's Dr. Bixby's head secretary."

"Abby Pitcher?" Burns said.

"Isn't she a bit old for you?" Meadows added.

"I was still chatting her up, a bit more than the other competing lads. She's also the youngest secretary. Smart too."

"And Pavlovic was pursuing her as well?" Crane said.

"Seemed to me he was, that dirty old man."

"Tell me, Edwin," Meadows said, apparently deciding that beating to death that horse would get them nowhere, "do you play rugby?"

Edwin nodded. "I'm the team captain."

"I suppose you lift weights as part of your training?"

"I can press two hundred pounds easily enough. So what?"

"Are any of our interviewees also members of your team?"

"How could I know who you plods interviewed?"

Meadows handed Edwin the list of boys they'd decided to interview and a red pen. "Check off the names of the team members, please."

"Is that going to get them into trouble?"

"Not necessarily. We're looking for a big bloke who can lift something heavy."

“You’d better talk to Andy Simms then. He’s captain of the wrestling team.”

“Did he study Russian with Pavlovic?” Crane said.

“No. He passed some tests to get course credits. His father worked in the UK’s Moscow embassy, so he already knew the language.”

After they excused Edwin who then departed, happy to leave them, Meadows turned to his team members. “I’m botching this investigation.”

“Sir, who’d have guessed that some students already spoke the language,” Crane said. “We just used that as a filter for our first interviews.”

“So, am I supposed to believe that Edwin Berg killed Boris Pavlovic because he was jealous of a perceived relationship between Boris and Abby Pitcher? That’s absurd.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, I’m sure,” Burns said, winking at Crane.

“Um, there’s no indication that this Andy Simms had it in for Pavlovic either. I think this visit here has been a damned waste of time.”

Burns had been deep in thought. “I’m thinking that we should interview Abby Pitcher. Maybe there was a serious relationship between Abby and Boris that went awry.”

Meadows frowned. *What had Dr. Bixby said?* Abby had gone out with Boris a few times, but there were probably too many years between those two for a serious relationship? What if that wasn’t the case, and it had been serious? And Pitcher had become a young woman scorned by a handsome and sophisticated fellow?

“Yes, let’s do that. Miss Pitcher might be hiding something, and we’ve not followed Judy Bixby’s suggestion that we ask her about Boris’s past.”

Lachlan Stuart stared at the text message. He’d known it would be only a matter of time before the police would want to talk to anyone who knew anything about Viking battle axes. But Lilith had given him that axe—ironically, as a wedding present—so it was appropriate that he’d used it to kill her lover. No one would report her death anytime soon, though; she was supposedly in Australia visiting some family.

He’d gone into a rage and killed the Serb, though, and it had seemed fitting to use Lilith’s axe on him. It was too bad that from where she was now, she couldn’t have seen his response to her betrayal, at least the part involving her lover.

What had Lilith seen in that damned Serb? Lachlan had given her everything! He’d even shared her fascination for her Viking ancestry. Their merged collection of Scottish and Viking artifacts was well known and often served as an additional treat for tourists who came to visit their old castle and their trove of weaponry. The animatronic figures who reenacted a battle between a Scottish chieftain and a Viking invader was worth the price of the ticket, some visitors had commented. Only one silly visitor had said that Stuart didn’t sound very Scottish, but Lachlan had corrected that oaf: Mary Queen of Scots had Frenchified the surname Stewart, so blame her!

He had to admit that Lilith’s hobby had saved the castle that had been built by his Stuart ancestors by adding useful additions to their castle tour. That didn’t excuse her actions!

By the time someone checked why he hadn’t responded to the damn text message or ask why Lilith hadn’t returned from Australia, he’d be long gone. That was a pity. He loved the castle and its collection of weaponry. *But maybe I’ll take some of the collection with me?*

Chapter Six

Abby Pitcher was hardly a femme fatale. The tiny redhead had a good figure, though, one of a runway model in miniature, and a pleasant personality. Meadows was somewhat charmed by her and supposed most men would be more approving than not. Her speech had a pleasant North Country or Scottish lilt to it, and what she said sounded more educated than most women who led similar lives.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions about Boris Pavlovic, Miss Pitcher,” Meadows said to begin the interview. He gave a nod to DC Crane and DS Burns. “Karen will be taking a few notes as we proceed; Ian might ask a few questions of his own. This is only an information gathering session for us as part of our investigation into Pavlovic’s death. We need information, so any help you can provide will be greatly appreciated. We’re not here to charge you or make your life difficult, so you don’t need a solicitor, but we can call your own or one of our duty solicitors if you feel the need.”

“I understand, and I don’t need a solicitor.” She sipped at the tea from the nick’s canteen. “Ew! I can’t believe you plods drink this foul beverage.”

“We tend to counter its effects by consuming too many biscuits,” Meadows said with a smile. “Now, returning to Mr. Pavlovic, our murder victim. We understand you dated him a few times?”

She nodded. “’Twas every woman’s dream, in a sense, Inspector: Educated, witty, neat, courteous, and a true gentleman.”

“Quite a bit older than you, I dare say,” he countered. “That wasn’t a problem?”

“Um, might run in my family, I suppose. My father was eleven years older than my mum. They got along fine, those two. Mum felt and I also feel that men our own age aren’t as interesting as older, more experienced men. Your sergeant here, for example, has that rugged look about him, a bit of hunk as the female fans of Hollywood idols might say. You, Inspector, are much more interesting. An experienced man of years who knows what he wants in life.”

Meadows fought down a blush but only partially succeeded and ended the effort with a polite cough and dismissing hand wave. “Why did you stop seeing Mr. Pavlovic socially then?”

“Let’s just say there were conflicts of interest.”

Karen, stylus hovering over her smart phone, said, “Could you be more specific, Miss Pitcher?”

“I could, if it doesn’t leave this ugly little room.” She frowned. “And you make no note of it in your damned mobile.”

“Go ahead,” Meadows said. “This is only a private conversation between the four of us. We have no need now to disclose the source of our information.”

“Well then, I’ll be frank, even though it might upset someone like you, Inspector: Pavlovic was bi, and so am I. Even with just one person playing both sides—it’s usually the woman, I believe, but I might be wrong—that’s a huge difficulty. But with both of us? Not advisable, I dare say.”

“Did you find that out in some intimate moment?”

“What a nice, polite way to ask that question, Inspector. No, just in an intimate conversation. We mutually agreed that such a situation might cause problems in the future. I’d originally thought he might be gay but was determined to make sure because I was quite attracted to the bloke. But he admitted he was bi, so I did too. We remained good friends, though. Confidants actually.”

Poor Edwin hadn't had a chance, Meadows thought. *He was just an infatuated and naïve teenager with raging hormones!* “Let’s move beyond that mutual agreement, Abby. During your chats, did he ever talk about his past at all? In particular, did he ever mention any enemies?”

“Ones who owned a Viking battle axe?” she said with a smile.

“You’ve been reading our local broadsheet, I see, or watched BBC news.”

“I was curious about what had occurred in his home country from his perspective. To answer your question, Boris talked about how awful that war in the old Yugoslavia had been. It was bad enough for me just to listen to his stories. As for enemies, he hoped he’d left all his family’s behind when he came here. They’d already been killed, of course.”

“Did he mention any of those killers?”

“Not specifically. Some, like the soldiers, he didn’t even know their names. It was a bloody civil war, Inspector, something like what occurred in Northern Ireland, I suppose, only worse.”

“Did he fear that someone from his homeland would come looking for him?” Burns said.

“No, I don’t think that was a concern. That war occurred so long ago. I suspect his killer was someone local. And no, I don’t have any evidence to back that up. He was well liked.” She took a moment to wipe away a few tears. “There is someone who might have hated him, though: Lachlan Stuart.”

Burns pulled out his composite list and pointed to one of the names. “Is this the Lachlan Stuart we’re discussing?”

“Yes, maybe. I can’t confirm the address, but the town’s correct. It’s a bit southwest of here.”

Meadows nodded at his companions. “You two can pay the man a visit.”

Chapter Seven

Lachlan Stuart was one of those rich toffs who avoided the government's heavy taxes on his estate by allowing paying visitors to tour his castle. Ian had always thought of it as a toff's scam—they got a tax break and collected entrance fees as well—but it was standard practice, especially in the historic borders region that ran west from Edinburgh to Glasgow.

The Stuarts' residence was a small castle that contained Lachlan's collection of Scottish weaponry and his wife's of Viking weaponry, forever joined together when they'd become husband and wife later in life. That combined collection was listed as an attraction for tourists on the Stuarts' website along with the castle and its grounds; a visit there also included an animatronics display featuring Scottish and Viking warriors in mortal combat.

"Disneyland for adults addicted to violence?" Burns said to Crane as they drove west on M8.

"I suppose Disney helped make animatronics popular," she said, "but now they don't differ much from brainless robots. In fact, I suppose they might only impress children more than adults now, especially when the figures are dinosaurs. In any case, that must have been quite an investment for Lachlan and Lilith Stuart to make ten years ago. I hope it's been worth it."

"Must have been. He still owns the castle and grounds, although there's a mall mortgage left. If it had failed to save the estate from the Chancellor of Exchequer, they'd be living somewhere else. Not a problem as I see it, except for wounding their privileged prides, especially Lachlan's. On the other hand, because many tourists love these old properties, they're probably living in some dark corner space at the rear of that castle."

"That probably would still be bigger than my flat. And they'll still have servants."

Ian didn't consider that to be an expression of jealousy, just an observation of how differences between the UK's middle classes and the rich still existed. "I'll not express any sympathy for that pair and their battles with the government over taxes."

"Yes, hold your tongue, you radical firebrand," she said, flashing him a smile. "Shall we buy tickets for a tour?"

"Um, not as police. In any case, let me call first."

The website had announced the hours when the castle and grounds were open to the public, given directions to and from, and provided a phone number to make a reservation. There was no answer when Ian called, but he could leave a message. He did just that, saying that he and his sister would like to visit and see everything, especially the collection of weapons. He ended the message with only his name and mobile number.

"They could be away and told servants to ignore phone calls."

"Someone will be our guide if we're to believe the website's list of visiting hours."

She nodded, knowing that Ian wasn't about to travel that distance only to be turned away. "The inspector said to go, so we're going."

Meadows had been studying the history of that Yugoslavian chaos that had shown how useful NATO could be in post-war Europe long before the crisis in Ukraine.

"Do we have any responses to the text messages?" he'd asked. Ian had held up three fingers. "Worth visiting them?" Ian then held up two. "Visit them too if you can manage it. I wouldn't put too much stock in Abby's bisexual blathering, to be honest. What do we know about this wanker Stuart, by the way?"

“When he married his wife Lilith, they combined their collections. You can see that right on their website. She was the one who collected Viking weaponry.”

“Any battle axes in the wife’s collection?”

Ian shrugged. “Unknown. The Viking artifacts might only be shields and swords. There’s a show offered too.” Ian explained that. “Sounds a bit crazy, I suppose.”

“Any tourists who are fans of ancient weaponry are candidates for an insane asylum, I dare say. But make your visit. And don’t dawdle. I want you two to visit Edwin’s parents too. Something’s not right with that lad. Maybe Boris molested the young man. I doubt that Abby saw Boris in action, if you know what I mean, but we’d now be remiss to not check that for both Pavlovic and Pitcher. Either one could have acted like a parish priest with his choir boys. I’d think a boys school would provide more targets than some parish that now counts mostly wrinklies among its parishioners.”

Apparently, Karen Crane was thinking about that conversation with Inspector Meadows as well. “Do you think that our DI suspects everyone of criminal activity?”

“I suppose the longer we’re in these jobs, the more the seamier side of society biases our thinking. If we follow the laws, does it matter?”

“It could affect our personal relationships.”

Ian immediately thought of his family, son Bobby and housekeeper Mrs. MacDougall. *No, he could never count them as criminals!* “That’s something we must avoid.”

“Mr. Stuart isn’t here right now,” the family’s butler told Karen and Ian when they arrived at the Stuarts’ castle. “You’ll get more out of your tours if you return when he’s present to guide you.”

“We’ve come all the way from Edinburgh,” Ian said. “Can’t you take us around? The website says the castle is open now, after all.”

“That it is, good sir. It’s just that the master has in-depth knowledge of all the exhibits and their provenance.” He sighed. “Very well, please follow me.”

The castle wasn’t Versailles, but it had been well maintained. It had been some Scottish lord’s who’d probably never have tolerated turning his family’s home into a tourist attraction, but taxes and maintenance costs had forced its sale to the rich Lachlan Stuart, a man without noble blood but with a lot of available cash. Later, after the marriage, the wife Lilith had moved in too.

“They’ve lived here now for more than ten hears,” the butler-guide said. “The original owner now has a flat in an assisted living facility found in the London suburbs.”

“Does he remain friends with the current owners?” Ian said.

“No. Mr. Stuart bought this property from the bank for pence on the pound. Quite sad.”

“But he kept you and the other staff on?”

“Naturally. There’s too much here for two people to maintain by themselves. We bring people in from outside as well to help.”

While small, the castle was still impressive, and they saw all of it except for a small section corresponding to the owners’ and servants’ living quarters. They spent more time in the study, though, a large room with a high ceiling; it was filled with ancient weapons and some other artifacts.

The butler’s mobile rang. He glanced at it. “Please take your time looking around. I must take this call outside.”

Their guide soon returned. “The last stop on your tour inside the castle is a visit to the sentry’s tower. In the old days, he would be there to warn about any approach of English marauders so the laird could ready the castle’s defenses. It now provides a wonderful view of the entire property, including the river, where you’ll be free to walk around later. Please follow me.” They went down two halls, one taking them towards the castle’s rear, the other going parallel to it, until they arrived at steep stairs. “Please watch your step.”

In single file, they climbed the ancient stone stairway’s high risers up to a doorway that led into a small room. The officers followed the butler inside; he opened some old wooden shutters.

“What a wonderful view!” Karen said.

“I hope you enjoy it.”

The butler backed away from them as if he was allowing them to near the line of windows to enjoy the view better. He went farther, though, backing out the small doorway onto the stair landing and them slamming the door shut.

“What the hell?” Ian said as they heard the butler relocking the door.

Karen tried it and confirmed it was locked. “I’ll be damned! The phone call! Stuart must have told his butler to lock us in here.”

Ian opened one of windows fully. A strong breeze now swept in, almost knocking him over as he looked down. “No escape from here, hen. We’re the butler’s prisoners.”

She sighed. “The butler definitely did it!”

Chapter Eight

DC Karen Crane smiled at DS Ian Burns's frustrated expression, thinking her colleague was missing the obvious: They still had their mobiles! "Just use your mobile to call Inspector Meadows," she said.

He slapped his head. "Of course!" He tried that. "Damn it! No bars!"

She tried too. "You're right. But the butler received a call!"

"Maybe his phone was better charged, or it's interference from this old castle. And we're too far from the nearest cell tower? I should have charged up before coming. Remember, he left us alone in the study. Did he go outside knowing he might lose the connection? Residing here, he'd know if we were in a dead zone. Whatever. These old stone walls could be loaded with metal impurities." He shook his head sadly. "We're on our own, Karen."

"You're the brilliant DS. Get us out of here!"

He thought a moment but then snapped his fingers. "As they say, it takes two to tango. I'll hold on to you while you lean outside the window. Get your mobile ready. You have Meadows on speed dial, right?"

On the first try, she got one bar, but it oscillated between off and on. They opened another window fully, thinking a different angle might work better. The reception became worse. He helped her back inside again and took another look from yet a different window. "Lots of rusty old grillwork around this back wall, and the tower is above a back courtyard. Maybe there's a Faraday cage effect or something similar?"

"A what? Let's not worry about the weather! I don't mind getting a bit wet, and a fair day makes no difference to our plight. We live in Scotland, DS Burns!"

"All that iron can inhibit reception from and transmission to a cell tower, especially if there's not one very near, and it's on the other side of the castle."

"But you don't know that. Maybe I just need to move farther out?"

"I could do that, but you can't hold me. I have a few extra pounds compared to you, hen."

"I should hope so." She thought a moment. "What if I stand on a windowsill, hold onto the top of the window with one hand, and lean out as far as I can with the other?"

"Not a bad idea, but if there's a misstep, I can't help you. But I can try what you suggested. I'd have more chance for success too because my arms and legs are longer."

"There's just one problem with that, Ian. You're a bit clumsy 'cause you're big. And I'd rather you use your rigger's body to break down that door."

He glanced at the locked door. "It looks very solid."

"But the knob and lock assembly looks like a relic from the Victorian era."

"Old things were often sturdier than their modern versions, but I can try what you suggest."

"Do you remember when we danced together at the Christmas party?"

He blushed. "I'd had a bit too much nog, hen. And why do you mention that now?"

"Because you weren't clumsy when dancing. You followed the music. In fact, I later got a few comments that we danced well together. Alan, the head SOCO, even asked if we'd taken classes together."

"He was jealous?"

"Only because he dances like a T-Rex watching his feet so much that he falls face first into the Jurassic swamp. What I'm trying to say is that if we can time it so we hit that door together, we might smash through it or break the lock mechanism."

“Or our shoulders. Let’s take a few practice runs across the room together first.”

She started to hum a fast old Scottish tune, and they made three trial runs. After the third, they both slapped their legs and doubled over laughing.

“We can call the dance ‘The Stone Tower Hustle,’” she managed to say.

“TBD. Let’s try the damned door now.”

Her singing was louder now, but the plan still didn’t work—not completely. But they did enough damage that Ian could complete the task with some well-placed kicks around the knob and lock mechanism. It soon dropped out of the door. They heard it drop somewhere on the other side to the stair landing.

Ian opened the door. “After you, Detective Constable.”

“Don’t mind if I do, Detective Sergeant.”

Ian tiptoed down the stairs after her. They both went outside the castle where Ian finally could call Meadows, still with only one bar on his mobile, but it was now a steady one.

Two uniformed officers from the small rural substation, a sergeant and constable, arrived first in a patrol car and found Karen and Ian going over the relics in the study again, now taking their time and making an inventory because they’d verified that they were alone at the castle. Ian stationed them in the front and back to secure the castle and warn them of any new arrivals, particularly the Stuarts or their butler, whom the uniforms knew, of course. When a pair of local AROs appeared, Ian also split them up to accompany those uniformed but unarmed officers (their only weapons were their fists and batons).

By the time Meadows arrived—he’d traveled the farthest, of course, duplicating their trip from Edinburgh—the castle was more than secure.

“Welcome to Lachlan Stuart’s castle,” Karen said to her DI when he entered the study and glanced around.

“Where is everyone? I suppose this toff Stuart’s done a runner with his wife, but where’s their staff?”

“Also gone,” Ian said. “The butler’s definitely in on it.” Meadows already knew the butler-guide had locked his officers in the tower and had resisted gloating about it as Ian had expected him to do. “It’s possible that only Mr. Stuart and the butler lived here.”

“I explored their living quarters,” Karen said. “It seems like Lilith Stuart might still be here too, not in Australia as claimed. Clothes and luggage are still in her closets.” She winked at Meadows. “They weren’t sleeping together, by the way. Perhaps more of a platonic marriage?”

“Um, so much for romance in a romantic Scottish castle,” Meadows said. “But neither Stuart was here when you arrived?”

“No, we only saw the butler,” Ian said. “He approached us in the car park and then gave us a tour.”

“Ending with you two locked in a tower.”

He couldn’t resist, Ian thought.

“The butler received a call while we were here in the study,” Karen said. “He had to step outside to take it. We think it was either Lachlan or Lilith warning the butler.”

“Couldn’t be avoided, I suppose. Who knew the butler was part of this gang? We’ll finish up here, but we need to find those three. Doing a runner’s an admission of guilt. I already put out a BOLO. We’ll nick them soon enough. What are you doing here now? Cataloguing the toffs’ collection?”

“That should indeed be done,” Ian said. “We were more curious about whether there are any more battle axes here.”

“Lilith Stuart’s maybe? Are there?”

“Doesn’t seem to be any. Just Scottish swords, maybe from Lachlan’s original collection. I wonder if they’ll miss their precious relics if they’re about to flee the country.”

“We’d still need evidence that the damned Viking axe came from here. Let’s try to find some record that shows it was. You’d think they’d need that if only for insurance purposes.”

Ian jerked a thumb towards the small desk in the corner. “That might be found on that computer’s hard drive or backed up on a portable one.”

“And/or in a safe deposit box at some local bank,” Karen said.

“Um, all good ideas. Let’s at least try to find some bank statements or something similar. We can also see if any large withdrawals have been made, indicating they’re not returning. They could have several accounts, in fact, with all the money these toffs have.”

SAMPLE

Chapter Nine

After lunch two days later, they were still going around in circles. The Stuarts and their butler couldn't be found. All the relics from the castle were now being held as possible evidence. But Karen and Ian were studying a ledger that they'd discovered in a safe deposit box at one of the Stuarts' banks. Murder investigations took precedent over individuals' privacy when it came to murder, especially when a judge backed up that claim with a proper warrant.

"Bad news sir?" Ian said to Meadows when he entered the open-plan CID area.

"Odd news I'd call it," he said after perching atop Ian's desk. "FYI detectives: Lilith Stuart never made it to Australia. Her relatives have been trying to call Lachlan. They're worried about her. So maybe she is with Lachlan and the butler."

Ian thought a moment. "Have the SOCOs gone over all the castle and its grounds?"

"I thought that would be a waste of time," Meadows said.

Karen eyed Ian. "Are you thinking that Boris wasn't Lachlan's first murder?"

Meadows nodded. "I see where you're going, lad: The eternal triangle? Could be. If the Stuarts weren't sleeping together, maybe Lilith had some action on the side with Boris."

"That would be quite a long-distance relationship," Ian said, "even if only from Edinburgh and not Sydney. But it's possible. Or they met halfway at some cozy little bed and breakfast. We should trace her recent activities before she supposedly left for Australia."

"And that might be when she left the land of the living instead," Karen said. "Does it matter that Boris was bi?"

"I wouldn't think so," Meadows said. "And that might add a bit of spice to the bed scenes, in fact."

"Please don't elaborate," Karen said. "I found some sex toys in one of her bathroom drawers. I thought she used them with Lachlan. Now I'm not so sure."

"You never mentioned that," Meadows said with a smile. "If those two were seen together at an inn or otherwise, we might be onto something. Of course, the question is: Did Lachlan know about Lilith's relationship with Boris? Two questions really: Did he even care? We have more work to do."

The butler entered the yacht's main cabin, eyed the large garbage bag in the corner with a sneer, and said to Lachlan Stuart, "The rozzers got free, sir."

"One of them probably found the spare keys in the desk in the study. No problem, old fellow, and you managed to delay them enough. Thank you for trying, Mr. Hazleton. It gave us a bit more time. We'll all stay here for a bit. They'll have all the ports covered anyway. For now, we'll be okay here. Nobody knew Lilith had inherited a yacht. Be sure, Roger, to dress less formally, though. You'll stand out like a bloody sore thumb otherwise."

The butler smiled. "You too sir. I think the mistress had some yachtsman's shorts somewhere. I'll look for them."

Lachlan laughed, stood, and picked up a sword from the coffee table. He brandished it, its broad, flat blade moving air like the blade of a fan. "No yachtsman could wave a sword like this, Roger. We'll have to hide it if some authorities or other unwanted guests show up."

"And the body in the bag?"

"We'll dump that once we're at sea. We can use some weights from her damned gym to weigh it down. Don't look so maudlin, man. She betrayed me!"

"I blame the Serb more, sir."

To be honest, Lachlan had no idea what Lilith had seen in Boris. Maybe she'd just wanted to experiment a bit after they both seemed to lose interest in each other. Merging their collections of ancient weapons hadn't been an adequate glue between them, in any case.

That disgusting Boris had tried to play both sides! Had Lilith encouraged him to do that so they could become some kind of perverted triad? He'd heard of Yanks' wife-swapping and other crazy things, even seen it on telly. One would think that the traditionalist Lilith—one only had to consider her collection of Viking artifacts and her reorganization of the castle—would eschew such quirky practices! Had the bitch only wanted to shag two men at the same time? Or maybe she was still looking for another woman to make it a sleazy quartet? He'd never know the answers to those questions now.

He glanced at the large bag in the corner. *I hope I put enough lime in there. Otherwise, she'll stink up the yacht! Her yacht!*

He'd been surprised when she inherited her ex's boat. They should have sold the damned thing, although now it would be of some use. He'd been even more surprised when she went against his wishes and refused to sell it. That occurred before they began the castle tours. They'd needed a cash infusion to pay some back bills. She'd come up with the tour idea instead. Getting the government to believe that the castle should be declared a historical landmark had taken a few bribes here and there, though, so he'd had to borrow some money anyway. But the tours had at least put the banks on their side.

Lachlan went to the sideboard and poured himself a full glass of Dalwhinnie. That whiskey wasn't his favorite, but Lilith had enjoyed it. He toasted the plastic bag. "Here's to you, you old bitch!"

Ian knocked on his DI's door jamb. Meadows invited him into the office with, "Any luck finding any of our three suspects?"

The DS smiled. *The crusty old goat is all business.* "A bit sir, but only relating to Lilith Stuart."

"Don't keep me in suspense. Is she dead as we feared?"

"I can't answer that, but she entered the marriage quite rich, one asset being her own yacht she inherited from her ex-husband, who died years ago."

"Blokes like Lachlan have all the luck, lad. Almost makes me want to get married. Where's home port for this feckin' yacht?"

"Newcastle on the east coast, or Bristol on the west. It's been docked at both ports in the past. We think it's now in Newcastle, though, to be near to Edinburgh."

"I know where it is. Wouldn't customs or harbor patrol have flagged it for us?"

"In response to your message?" Martin Meadows nodded, apparently hoping to have done something right to further the investigation. "That probably went out to nick Lachlan or the butler as well, but maybe not for Lilith. The boat's in her name."

"And that would make no difference to everyone was happily hiding on the yacht, maybe even an advantage for them, until things settle a bit, and then they would speed away to somewhere on the continent. Spain, France, Italy—take your pick. Say, those rich toffs might even have a villa in one of those countries. Look into that."

"I already queried Europol and Interpol about that possibility. But your first guess is a better and definite possibility. Shouldn't we take a look at the yacht?"

"I'm looking into the butler's background. Roger Hazleton was dishonorably discharged from the army for a GBH in the barracks. He was also headed to jail here for petty thievery, but

he grassed on the rest of his gang. Hiding from them in plain sight, I'd call his pretending to be a feckin' butler, but those gang members are looking for him, I'm sure. Those three are out of jail now." He chuckled. "For good behavior. Translation: The gaol needed the space they took! I suppose revenge takes second place to more thievery, though, especially if they're short on funds. I want to talk to at least one of them." Meadows thought a moment. "But it might be a bit more fun to visit one of my old haunts and the arses there who made my previous post so difficult. Tell my old DI I'm up for another promotion to DCI here now, for example."

"Are you?"

"Of course not! But those bozos ignore Police Scotland. North of the border might as well be the Gobi Desert for them. The only thing Scottish they care about is whiskey. So, Ian, I'll be riding with you. Crane can go talk with the butler's old mates."

"With a male PC or PS for protection, I hope. You can't send her into the wolves' den alone."

"Um, I don't see why not. She's a she-wolf who could castrate any of them if she wanted. But I see your point. I'll give her a ring while you get a car from the pool. Better the nick's petrol than yours or mine."

Chapter Ten

The two police officers chatted amiably about many things not pertaining to the case during the shortest but most scenic route they chose along the coast's A1 from Edinburgh, Scotland to Newcastle, England, Meadow's target his old nick just north of the city, another suburban substation with a lot of crime, although Edinburgh's often was worse.

DCI Leonard Whittaker, once a DS who was paired with Meadows, pretended to enjoy seeing DI Meadows again.

"Just checking in. We'll be visiting a yacht in the harbor. As a courtesy, I thought you might like a briefing about the case." He nodded to Leo and winked at Ian.

"I saw your BOLO. We've been busy, so I left that case to the harbor patrol. As far as I know, they haven't discovered anything, if they even bothered to look. I'm surprised you didn't do the same. Actually, I'm surprised you came all this way. Not enough to do up there in Auld Reekie, I'm guessing. Or something else brought you here? What might that be, if I may ask?"

You may, you old bastard, thought Meadows. *Spewing the same old shite, he is.* "Some good detective work on our part and expecting no help from Newcastle plods." He hadn't bothered to ask, of course. He knew what the answer would've been. And they certainly hadn't responded to the BOLO! "We just found out that the wife of one of our suspects owns that yacht."

"Um, isn't it usually the other way around? It's the gents who like fishing or hunting, not the lady folks."

"Circumstances differ in this case," Ian said, following Meadows's lead about being circumspect.

He's noticed that old Leo and me aren't the best of friends. "It's probably going to be a fool's errand, my being the fool, but we're leaving no stones unturned, as they say."

"Are you here to request backup? AROs, SOCOs, uniformed officers? We're not in a position to—"

"None of that, Leo. Wouldn't want to bother you with such trivial pursuits. It's just a murder case, as you'd know if you'd really read the BOLO. I just don't want you to interfere in our work. It might be a bit too complex for you folks to handle, to be honest."

Whittaker frowned but made no comment because Meadows and Burns were already standing. They walked out, Meadows giving a little wave over his shoulder from the doorway.

"That went well," Meadows said after they settled into their car. "We'll be watching, lad. Leo might just put a tail on us. I want you to lose him."

There were a few suspicious cars behind them as they went along the way to the harbor. Ian had no trouble giving them the slip. They soon found Lilith Stuart's yacht, but Meadows told Ian to drive past it and park several boat-widths down the pier from it. They sat in the car for a moment to take in their surroundings.

From what he'd seen passing by the yacht, Ian told Meadows that Lilith's ex must have been very rich and had good tastes. "What do we do?" Ian said. "Ask them to surrender if they're onboard? Fat chance they'd do that, right? And they'll probably have guns instead of Scottish or Viking tenth-century weapons."

"That yacht looked deserted to me. I don't think they're onboard. This was a fool's errand except for my being able to goad old Leo a bit. I certainly wasn't going to let him take

over our case, or even participate in it initially. And that's what he'd have done if we'd given him any more information."

Ian eyed the gangplank going up to the yacht's deck. "What are the rules sir? Can we go onboard without a warrant?"

"Normally, we'd ask for one from a DCI or Super. I'm sure old Leo knows the answer and has friendly judges who could provide a warrant if necessary. When I was working in this area, I never had port duty, so I don't know the answer. You obviously don't either. So let's plead ignorance and just go aboard to snoop around a bit."

"Aye, aye, matey, sounds like a plan. The first part of one, at least. If there's any sign of occupancy, we can hide and lie in wait for them, right?" Meadows nodded. "And call your friend Leo for backup if needed?"

Meadows now shook his head from side to side. "Only as a last resort. And Whittaker's no friend of mine. A born backstabber he was, and political as hell. Not an honest copper's bone in that man's body, I dare say. By backup, do you mean AROs?" Now Ian nodded. "No worry, lad. Leo's nick isn't the only game in Northumberland."

"We might need someone with guns sir. We have no idea what firepower our suspects have."

"To be honest, even a knife or hatchet is more than we have, lad. But let's do it anyway. Can't let Leo or anyone else have all the glory, can we?"

Ian decided not to answer that question because his DI might not like his answer.

Their careful boarding was wasted, though. There was plenty of evidence that two persons were staying onboard, most of it found in the galley with its sink full of dirty dishes, but only two of the four bunks had been used and left unmade.

"The owner's not here," Ian whispered. They could see no evidence for a female presence. "And I think it's just Batman and Robin."

"'Tis lookin' more like poor Lilith has walked the plank, lad, her husband and butler being the pirates who've taken over the ship."

They walked back into the main cabin only to find Lachlan and Roger waiting for them. The first man was easily brandishing a heavy sword. From his rippling biceps, the two officers could tell that Stuart could have also easily handled that Viking battle axe.

"We just came onboard to invite you to lunch," Meadows said, reaching down to the sofa, grabbing a loosely knitted throwover, and tossing it at the toff. Stuart got all tangled up in it.

That led to Ian making his move. He went after Lachlan with a wooden stool from the card table, scattering a card deck all over, while Meadows turned on Roger. Meadows wrapped his arms around the butler in a bear hug, squeezed hard enough to break some ribs, and threw the smaller man to the floor.

Ian meanwhile was struggling a bit while parrying Lachlan's sword thrusts and chopping blows, so Meadows grabbed another stool and smashed it onto the big man's head. The dazed man stumbled and got more tangled in the throwover and then fell to the floor. The DI stepped on the toff's sword hand, crushing the fingers with pleasure.

"Who needs AROs?" Meadows said.

After tying up their two suspects with lamp chords and reading them their rights as dictated by the CPS, Meadows made some calls...but not to Whittaker's nick. Soon two uniforms left the yacht with Stuart and the butler in tow. The two officers from Edinburgh put on latex gloves and Tyvek booties—Ian usually carried a good supply—and searched the entire yacht.

Ian found two guns, a Glock and an H and K, locked in the drawer of a small desk. “Good thing they couldn’t easily get to these.”

“Might not even have known they were there,” Meadows said. “‘Tis Lilith’s yacht, remember? Let’s finish our search and then go have a chinwag with those two wankers. I’ll take on Lachlan; you can have the butler. Careful with what you say. Those uniforms are from another nick, but the DI there doesn’t love me too much either.”

“Why don’t we get them transferred to Edinburgh? Scotland’s where the crimes were committed.”

“Because I’d like to know what happened to Lilith. It’s possible we can nick them for two murders, Boris and Lilith’s. And don’t worry. I’m not letting any plod from around here take credit for nicking them. They’re our arrests, lad.”

SAMPLE

Epilogue

Two months later...

“Way to keep calm, lad,” Meadows said to Burns after Lachlan Stuart’s trial.

The butler’s trial had been the easier one of the two because he had previous form but no proof of direct involvement in the murders of Lilith and Boris. He’d still be in jail for a long time for his participation in the disposal of Lilith’s remains and the attack on the two police officers.

Ian almost felt sorry for the butler. Stuart had a team of expensive and seasoned barristers from a reputable Edinburgh firm to defend him; Roger Hazleton had one junior barrister from a recent startup eager for new business in charge of his defense. Stuart might have saved a lot of money by employing the latter, though, because his fancy team still couldn’t save him from the guilty verdict of life in prison without the possibility of parole. Hazleton had been given ten years with a possibility of parole in seven.

They’d never said where they’d dumped Lilith’s body, and search teams never found it, not at their castle nor in the Newcastle area. The police figured she was at the bottom of the harbor somewhere.

But no matter. Roger grassed on Lachlan, testifying against his employer and telling the court how they’d butchered Lilith’s body to make it more portable. Considering the evidence for the relationship between Boris and Lilith, that’s all the Crown’s prosecutors needed to convict Lachlan and his butler.

“There’s one important question left besides where Lilith’s body is,” Ian told his DI over celebratory drinks after the trials, although the celebration was a bit muted.

“Um, what’s that lad?” Meadows said, following the question with a bite into his bacon roll.

“Where’s the Viking axe? Lachlan attacked us with a Scottish sword.”

“We have the axe, you twit.”

“No, it’s not in the evidence deposit. I checked. I thought the prosecutors had it with the other evidence, Scottish sword included.”

Meadows swallowed, washed homemade bread and bacon down with his lager, and then smiled. “Does it matter? We’ll eventually find it. Maybe it’s in some CPS bureaucrat’s private collection now.”

Not far from that pub, a solitary woman visited a new grave in a suburban church cemetery. She wiped away a few tears. “You were a fool,” she said. “We could have been enjoying our lives together now. You let her seduce you. You have no idea how that made me feel. We weren’t perverted freaks as Lachlan Stuart implied, you know. That’s no longer an issue in this country anymore. Even Alan Turing could now find happiness here. We could have been happy too, you prat.”

She put the single rose she’d brought with her on the gravestone after using the other hand to sweep some grass clippings off the gravestone’s name, date, and message for eternity: “Here lies an immigrant who fled to a strange land and learned to love it like his own.”

“Rest in peace, Boris,” Abby Pitcher said.

Christy followed Ian into the cottage, feeling a bit self-conscious. *Is it really the right time to meet this man’s family?*

“This is Bobby. Say hi to Christy, lad.” The seven-year-old, with his huge smile framed by a shock of wild, blond curls, ran to her and hugged her at thigh level as high as he could reach. “And this is Mrs. MacDougall, the happy general who keeps this man’s army well-fed and marching along, right Bobby?”

“Aye, aye sir!”

The housekeeper smiled at Christy, and then the two women hugged as well. “Welcome to our chaos, Christy.”

Christy later helped Ian set the table for dinner. “You have a nice family, Ian Burns. And I do believe Bobby will become a writer but maybe not a poet. He’s got quite an imagination.”

“He must play alone a lot. Mrs. MacDougall can only do so much. I spend all the time I can with them, but my work is very demanding of my time. It was slightly better when I was just a patrolman with regular shifts. Not enough for my ex, of course. I can’t really blame her.”

I can, Christy thought. *Why would any sane woman turn her back on this family?* She caught herself. *Don’t get starry-eyed and walk blindly into this, Christy. Ease into it.* She needed something more in her life, though. Ian Burns and his family might be just what she needed.

“This table is almost sorted. You can provide what’s missing, Christy.”

She caught her breath. *Is Ian Burns a mind reader?* she thought. She then relaxed when he said, “Please check over there in the cabinet. We have three wine glasses that survived the chaos when we moved to the cottage. Mrs. MacDougall eats with us, of course, but Bobby’ll only have ginger ale.”

Christy now smiled. *Ease into it, hen!* But she was more optimistic now. *It might just work!*

Note from Steve

You have just finished three more examples of my short fiction available as a free PDF download. Thank you for reading these stories. I hope you have enjoyed them. Because they're free, I'll not ask you to review them; but, if you like, use the contact page at my website, <https://stevenmmoore.com>, to let me know what you think about them, and whether you found them entertaining. Also, feel free to copy and pass this PDF around to your family and friends.

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

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

From Steven M. Moore...

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

"Detectives Chen and Castilblanco"

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

"Esther Brookstone Art Detective"

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

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

**Another novel that's a free PDF download

"Inspector Steve Morgan"

Legacy of Evil
Cult of Evil
Fear the Asian Evil

The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan*

“Clones and Mutants Trilogy”
Full Medical
Evil Agenda
No Amber Waves of Grain

Soldiers of God*

“Chaos Chronicles Trilogy”
Survivors of the Chaos
Sing a Zamba Galactica
Come Dance a Cumbia...with Stars in Your Hand!
(Note: This entire trilogy is now available as an ebook bundle titled *The Chaos Chronicles Trilogy Collection*)

Rogue Planet*

*Bridge books between series. The last novel provides a bridge to the Dr. Carlos stories found in several collections (see below) and to A. B. Carolan's third sci-fi mystery for young adults, *Mind Games*.

The following novels are independent from our others...

“The Last Humans”
The Last Humans
A New Dawn: The Last Humans, Book Two
Menace from Moscow: The Last Humans, Book Three

“Mary Jo Melendez Mysteries”
Muddlin' Through
Silicon Slummin'...and Just Gettin' By
Goin' the Extra Mile

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

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*

Sleuthing, British-Style, Volume Four*

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*

Esther Brookstone and the Art Forgers*

Revenge at Last*

Non-Fiction...

Writing Fiction, Rev. 11*

*More free PDF downloads; all others are ebooks.

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

Notes, Disclaimers, and Acknowledgements

Not much needs be said about the three tales contained in this collection. They move around the UK a bit and feature new characters, but otherwise they're just more traditional crime stories I enjoy writing. I get inspired to write a tale; hopefully readers benefit from my efforts.

As usual, any errors made here using British expressions are all mine. Even though I use the glossary at the beginning when I write about British crime, I can still make errors. They might be amusing to British readers of crime and mystery tales, but they're never intentional!

The cover is betibup33's from the first volume published by Draft2Digital. I hope she does not mind me reusing it to provide some additional continuity with and connection to the two PDF volumes and that first published one.

Because these free PDF downloads are completely DIY, the only other 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 probably 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

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.

SAMPLE