

Investigation

The Nunnery Murders

Chris Deggs

This is a work of fiction apart from the bits which aren't

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Chapter 1

As a coastal area of outstanding natural beauty, Ilfracombe boasted sharp cliffs and magnificent landscapes, all destined for exploration. Little did Alan Dymond, who loved living on that stretch of coastline, know his North Devon community would soon be famous for something else - the murder capital of the West Country. Natural beauty was forgotten for DI Dymond, as he stood staring at the macabre scene before him. Three people lay dead on the cold floor of the disused nunnery. He looked over at DS Copperwaite, his face a question mark. He'd never, in all his years as a policeman, come across such a murder scene. It looked so peaceful and bloodless. "Who called it in?" he asked his colleague.

Alisha Copperwaite checked her notes. "An anonymous male."

"What was he doing here?"

She shrugged "Up to no good, Oi'll be betting."

"We need to find him. Make that a priority."

"Yes, Guv."

Puzzled, he asked, "So why were they brought here?"

"Don't know, Guv," Alisha shrugged.

Taking a closer look, he said, "Have they got any ID on them?"

“No, Guv.”

“How inconsiderate of them,” he retorted. He often made light of murder victims - his way of dealing with the horror. More sensitive types found some of his remarks to be offensive. But DS Copperwaite, having worked alongside the DI for five years, had become impervious to his cold, dispassionate and sometimes eccentric ways. He would stare intensely at people but say nothing. He could be suddenly cantankerous, but she put up with it because he was a good detective - instinctive copper - a plodder who usually got results. Besides, she had a bit of a soft spot for the middle-aged officer who put her in mind of the American movie star, Robert Duvall.

The building had been there for as long as Alan could remember, but it was the first time he had stepped foot inside the Sacred Heart Nunnery, in Queens Road. From outside, the grey stone building resembled a mixture of both a church and a country home. Its grounds, confined by an eight foot stone wall that ran around three sides of the building, cut it off from the wooded landscape at the back of the nunnery. Until the three bodies had turned up there, it had remained empty since its closure, 15 years before.

DI Dymond saw Jimbo Barnes crouching over one of the victims. Approaching the police pathologist, he said, “So what have you got for us?”

The Forensic scientist looked up. “You took your sweet time getting here.”

“Well, they're not exactly going anywhere,” Alan quipped, indicating the bodies. “So what have we got here?”

“Three bodies. Two male, one female.”

“Tell me something Oi doesn't know.”

Jimbo looked at him. “They were shot.”

“Time of death,”

“Preliminary guess. Somewhere between two to three days.”

“Don't you mean hours?” Alan, enquired, puzzled.

“I know what I mean, inspector.”

DI Dymond crouched to get a closer look. “Oi am no expert, but they look loike fresh deaths to me,”

Jimbo smiled, “Yes, puzzling isn't it.”

“Unless they were killed somewhere else and brought out here.”

“Why would the killer do that. And why here?” Alan mused.

Jimbo looked at him and smiled. “It's your job to work that out, inspector. Mine is to get these three on the slab ASAP.”

Chapter 2

Alisha Copperwaite, compared photos of the victims' faces, taken at the scene of the crime, with the images in the missing person database kept by the UK Missing Persons Bureau.

“Any Joy.” DI Dymond said, upon entering the small information centre.

“There's nothing joyous about dead victims,” she sighed.

“You know what Oi mean.”

Scrolling through a list on the screen, she responded, “Nothing that matches our people, Guv.” She sighed and stretched. “Looks Loike nobody’s reported them missing. I guess we’ll have to wait and see what forensics come up with.”

He nodded, then said, “Keep on with it. You moight get lucky.” Just then his phone rang. It was the police pathologist. “Jimbo, have you got anything on the IDs?”

“Can you come over to the morgue?”

“Oi suppose so if it's important.”

Jimbo sounded serious. “There’s something I need to show you.”

Alisha looked up. “What’s Jimbo found out.”

“Bugger won't tell me. Wants me to go traipsing all the way over to Exeter.”

“Do you want company?” She added, “We can discuss the case on the way.”

“There nothing much to explain. Best if you stick with what you're doing.”

Jimbo Barnes, the senior doctor responsible for the performance of autopsies at the Exeter General Hospital, was busying determining how the three individuals had died. This task, of all the roles within the forensic science sector, was the most demanding and not for the faint-hearted. The Exeter Hospital mortuary accommodated, not only those who died in hospital but also those across Devon, whose cause of death was either unknown or not thought to be from natural causes. It was the latter type that concerned Jimbo.

“Now that you have me here Oi hope you've got something useful for me,” Alan stated as he entered Jimbo's clinical world with its offensive rotten but sweet smell. He always had to hold his breath at first.

The doctor turned to him, scalpel in hand. “They were all shot three times - two in the body, one in the head. They most likely died instantly. But not in the nunnery.”

“Oi'd already figured that, Doc. What with there being no blood an' all.”

“They were each murdered at different times; the murderer killed our Jane Doe first. The young fellow copped it last, no more than a day ago, I'd say.”

“Then the killer must have stored the bodies somewhere before depositing them in the nunnery.”

“Possibly in a chest freezer,” the pathologist suggested.

“Yes, but where?” Alan pondered.

Jimbo laughed. “You don't seriously expect me to know that, do you?”

“Just thinking out loud.”

The pathologist resumed his autopsy.”

“That's all you've got?”

“Right, inspector, that's all I've got for you at present.”

Alan frowned, “Not much is it.”

Just then his phone rang. Dr Elwood's name came up. “Allard, anything on the bullets yet?”

The head of forensics said, "Yes but it's probably best if I show you."

Alan replied, "Foine. Oi's already in Exeter so Oi'll pop over and sees you."

Dr Allard Elwood ran the base that operated as a regional centre for police forensic services. His team looked after ballistics, fingerprint and chemical services. Allard, below average height at 5 foot 2 inches, was no pushover. Swamped by his lab coat, he could easily be mistaken for a junior assistant. He was a straightforward leader, much respected by his team members. Those who met him for the first time got fooled by his cherubic look, but not for long.

Alan knew the man for who he was and treated him with the respect he deserved. Entering the lab, the detective approached the scientist. "Dr Elwood, what have you got for me?"

The doctor flashed a beatific smile. "All bullets came from the same gun. We've matched the slugs to a 9mm pistol."

"And the make?"

"G lock 17. It's a common enough gun. Thousands of them out there."

"How about IDs?"

Allard shook his head. "Not yet. None of the fingerprints is on file. We're waiting for dental records. How are you going with missing persons?"

"Nothing showing up. We're relying on you."

Allard stared at him, poker-faced. "There is one thing that might be helpful."

"Yes?"

"A couple of shoe prints near the nunnery entrance. Size eleven, off-road tread."

"That should narrow it down to about a million suspects."

Dr Elwood gave him a look.

"Anything else that 'could' be useful?"

"We're going over the clothing with a fine tooth comb. I'll let you know if we find anything."

By the time DI Dymond got back to Ilfracombe Police Station, he was ready to call it a day and go home. He knew the Chief Inspector wanted a report on the murders, but that could wait until tomorrow. As he passed the desk sergeant, Tom's voice rang out. "Alan, the boss wants to see you before you leave."

"Tell her you didn't see me, roight," he winked.

Then he heard someone say, "Ah! Just the person I'm looking for."

It was too late. The DCI had been lying in wait, like a female lion stalking its prey. That was all he needed after a long day. He didn't get on very well with Chief Inspector Doreen Gallagher. It was mutual, though. She didn't like his abruptness which she saw as rudeness. If he was into women in uniform, he might have seen her as a turn on. But it wasn't his thing, and he found the extreme way she strained her hair into a tight bun objectionable, especially as it seemed to stretch her skin, giving her eyes an Asian look. It was not that he was racist. He much preferred women with free-flowing hair.

"So where are we on the multiple murders, Alan?"

"Not very far."

“What do we know about the victims?”

“Their gender and the fact they were all shot with the same gun. Oh, and the victims weren't killed in the Nunnery.”

“How do you know that?”

“Oi don't. Dr Elwood does. It's got something to do with rigour mortise or lack of it.”

“Any idea where they 'were' killed?”

“Oi wish.”

“Yes, well we don't wish, DI Dymond. We gather sound evidence. So get out there and find me some.”

“Perhaps you'd loike us to find the lost golden city of Eldorado while we're at it, ma'am.”

She glared at him. “Don't be facetious. I can easily have you replaced.”

Alan slid away, his mind afire with the various ways he could bring about her demise. “The bitch!” he swore silently, heading to his office, to wind down. The case had hit a flat spot. He still didn't know the mystery caller's identity. He desperately needed a breakthrough or failing that a bit of JW libation to forget his blues. He reached for the half-full bottle of whisky in his desk drawer when his phone rang. “Yes.”

“Dr Elwood here. We have a name for one of our bodies.”

“Which one?”

“The eldest one. Dental records list our John Doe as Grover Birkbeck. Last known address 64 Fern Way, Ilfracombe.”

“Well done. Send the details to me immediately and work on the other two.”

Remarks like that got Elwood's back up. “What do you think we've been doing. There's nothing from dental records for the other two.”

While he awaited Dr Elwood's report, Alan poured himself a liberal amount of the mood-lifting alcohol into a small tumbler. Booting his laptop, he waited for the pinging sound signalling the arrival of new mail in his in box. Within minutes had had a printed copy in his hands. Downing the remainder of the whisky, he checked the time on his phone. It was getting late, and Megan was expecting him for dinner. Alan grabbed his things and left. On the way out of the building, he stuck his head around the door of the incident room. DS Copperwaite was the only one there. He handed the print-out to her.

“What's this?”

“The name and address of one of our victims. See what you can foind out.”

“Aren't you coming, Guv?”

“Not tonoight. The missus has got some legal types around for dinner. Oi'm expected to put in an appearance.”

Chapter 3

Fern Way, just off Marlborough Road, was a leafy suburban area. The drizzly night had taken a turn for the worse. Alisha's wipers were hardly up to the task of clearing the pelting rain. The bright lights of the holiday park and her SatNav told her she'd overshot the turn-off. A U-turn put Fern way

on her left. It was easier to make out the sign from that direction, although it was partly obscured by foliage, spreading out from untidy branches. She wished so much that she was home with hot cocoa, instead of being the messenger of bad tidings. Alisha sighed. It went with the job and never got any more comfortable.

She arrived at 64 Fern Way around 8 pm. It was getting late, but it was never the right time to deliver bad news. Wrapping herself up against the night's inclement weather DS Copperwaite steeled herself for the encounter to come. Grabbing an umbrella from the back seat, she stepped out into the wet, inky night. Lights were on in the house, strongly suggesting the presence of occupants.

In response to her knock, a woman's voice called through the door, "Who is it?"

"Police. Open the door please."

The door opened to reveal a grey-haired woman, probably in her seventies.

"Are you Mrs Birkbeck?"

"Yes. Why?"

"DS Copperwaite. Can we speak inside?"

Mrs Birkbeck looked disparagingly at the officer's wet clothes and dripping broly. "I suppose you'd better."

The cottage, filled with traditional farmhouse furniture as well as modern conveniences, retained its rustic charm. The exposed beams, low ceilings and uneven floors appealed to Alisha's quirkiness. A silver menorah in the centre of the dining table offset the cottage's unmistakable Englishness.

"Now what is all this about?" Mrs Birkbeck asked, sitting in an armchair facing the open fire.

There was no way to break the news gently. "We found the body of a man we believe to be your husband."

The senior woman remained strangely calm. "Where did you get that body?"

"In the disused nunnery."

Still composed, she said, "When was this?"

"Early this morning."

The woman smiled. "Then it cannot be Grover. He is visiting his brother in Israel."

Alisha, nonplussed, uttered, "Are you sure?"

The woman rose and went over to a bureau. Picking up a postcard, she handed it to the policewoman.

Alisha noted it depicted the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. On the back was a short message from her husband. It was postmarked in Jerusalem and had been posted two days previously. "Alisha stared at the woman. "But the dental records show our victim to be your husband."

The woman shook her head. "You must be mistaken. That's his handwriting. I would recognise it anywhere."

"There's one way we can prove this. Would you mind coming to identify the body? That way we will know for sure."

"Not tonight!" the woman said, startled. The cold will aggravate my arthritis something terrible."

“The sooner we do it, Mrs Birkbeck, the sooner you can have peace of mind.”

The woman smiled. “Detective, I rather think it's you who needs peace of mind.”

Alisha couldn't argue with that. “Oi will pick you up 9 am tomorrow.”

Alan didn't fancy having dinner with the legal types, as he referred to his wife's work colleagues. Even Megan wasn't that taken with the idea, but she was one of three candidates vying for a partnership in Lowel, Bent and Hardy, the firm of solicitors for whom she worked. It was the Hardy part of the business she was entertaining. Both Clarence and his wife, Martine, were in the firm, with him specialising in family law, while her expertise was in corporate law.

The roast chicken with potatoes and green beans went down well but not so the conversation. Alan did his best to be the genial host, for his wife's sake. As a police officer, he only had contact with criminal lawyers and even then mostly in court. In most cases Alan found them to be insufferably manipulative, with no respect for the law, unless it served them in their case. He tended to tar all legal eagles with the same broad brush. So when Clarence Hardy started on about how, in his opinion, many domestic violence cases weren't taken seriously by the police, Alan's hackles rose. He responded angrily, “We take all matters seriously. DV cases are moinefields for the police. Our hands are toied unless violence is involved or one of the parties brings charges against the other.”

Clarence puffed out his chest. This subject was his area of expertise. “Violence can be defined in many ways, inspector.”

“Yes, such as the violence meted out to our members. We investigate because somebody reports a disturbance. We foind one of those involved, usually the woman, scared, bleeding or both. We go to restrain her partner who, most loikely drunk, invariably puts up resistance. We have to use some force to control him. Then his bloody wife attacks us for hurting her man.”

“Then the police should be trained to deal with the situation differently,” Clarence scoffed.

Alan, having had enough of the lawyer's arrogant attitude, lashed out with his tongue. “You people only see the best of these thugs when in court. We have to deal with them when they are at their worst. You, in your safe, sanitised little world haven't got a fucking clue about what goes on at the coal face!”

Megan shot Alan a look that made Circe seem like an amateur. Forcing a smile, she said, “Let's just agree to differ, shall we?”

Alan, realising he'd gone too far, agreed.

“Who's for dessert then?” Megan smiled.

Martine Hardy, who had shrunk back in her seat said in a timorous voice, “That would be lovely.”

Alisha was adding some information to the whiteboard when Alan entered. Turning to face him she said, “Morning Guv. How did the dinner go?”

He grimaced, “Don't ask. More to the point how did you get on with Mrs Birkbeck.”

“It was odd. Mrs Birkbeck claims he's in Israel, visiting his brother.”

Alan put his hands together, as though in prayer. It was one of his affectations. “Odd indeed. You'd better get her to ID the body.”

“Already sorted. Oi'm picking her up at nine, Guv. But there's something else.”

“Yes?”

“She showed me a postcard. It was postmarked three days ago from Jerusalem.”

His eyes widened. “It was definitely from him?”

“She claimed it was his handwriting.”

He intensely stared at her. “Could the boffins have gotten the wrong dental records?”

“Beats me Guv. But if the body is that of Mr Birkbeck, which is most loikely the case, why would he tell her he was going to Israel if he didn't intend to do so?”

“Or did intend to but was stopped by his murderer.”

She shook her head. “It makes no sense. Why would somebody stop him from going to Israel, murder him and leave him with the other two in the nunnery?”

“Too many bloody questions and not enough answers,” he grumbled.

Jimbo Barnes and his team cared for some 2,500 deceased persons and their families each year. But apart from its role as the Exeter Hospital Mortuary, the morgue also took care of the general public. This location was where DS Copperwaite took Mrs Birkbeck for the identification. Alisha went into the viewing room with Mrs Birkbeck, while her sister waited in reception. There was a pane of thick glass between the living and the deceased. Mrs Birkbeck looked at the face of the body on the trolley, fully expecting it not to be her Grover. But it was him!

Alisha, seeing the elderly woman's look of pained surprise, asked, “Is this your husband?”

The bereft woman looked at her and nodded.

“You are certain that this man is Grover Birkbeck.”

“Yes,” she nodded, tearfully.” Then she said, “But I don't understand. There's the postcard and ...”

Alisha agreed, “Yes, it's all very puzzling. Can you give me his brother's contact details?”

“I have them at home.” She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Turning to the police officer, she said, “How did he end up like this?”

Alisha had no answers. She took the woman's arm and led her out to where her sister waited in reception.

Martha knew by the look in her sister's eyes that it was Grover. The younger sister, rising from her seat, hugged her sibling. “Oh, I'm so sorry for your loss,” she consoled, in an attempt to offer comfort to the widow.

Alisha interrupted, “Oi'm sorry to do this now, but Oi need answers to a couple of questions.”

Martha immediately went into protection mode. “This is not the time.”

Mrs Birkbeck patted her sister's arm. “It's okay, ask your questions.”

“Do you know of anybody who wished your husband harm?” Noting the blank expression on widow's face, Alisha elucidated, “Had he been arguing with anybody - a relative, a neighbour perhaps.”

She shook her head. “Nobody. He is very well liked by most people he meets.”

DS Copperwaite didn't correct her. It takes a while to adjust, to refer to a departed loved one in the past tense.

Dr Elwood rang DI Dymond around 11 am.

"Have you got anything for me?"

"I have the ID for the second victim."

"Great! What's the name?"

"Her name is Flavia Morgan."

"Anything else?"

"She's 56 years old, divorced and in the early stages of cervical cancer. That's how we found her, through her medical records."

"The medical profession must be becoming more liberal with patient details these days."

"It was Jimbo Barnes' lead. He mentioned his Jane Doe's condition to Mr Aubrey Sewell, the Chief Oncologist at St Martin's. He pulled a few strings, and Jimbo passed the info onto me."

"You! Why didn't pass it onto me? Oi'm after all in charge of this case."

"You'll have to ask him that."

DI Dymond called his troops together in the incident room. The case board was filling up with photos, names, addresses and other relevant details. Two of the victims now had IDs. Only one remained with a question mark above it. "Foinding out about our second body, that of a Flavia Morgan is our next task. He scrutinised his team. "O'Ryan foind out all about Ms Morgan. Take Ferguson with you." Seeking out DS Copperwaite, he said, Alisha, where are we on victim one?"

"The deceased has been confirmed as Grover Birkbeck. He does have a brother on a Kibbutz in Jerusalem, but he hadn't seen Grover for many years."

"Was he expecting a visit from his brother?"

"He says no. He did say that Grover had sent him the card and asked him to post in in Jerusalem."

Dymond put his hands together and raised his eyes. "Why?"

"He doesn't know. He didn't see any harm in it and didn't see any reason to question his brother's motives."

Alan said, "We need to know why he acted in such an odd way. When we have an answer, we'll have much more of an idea what this is all about."

"Yes, Guv. It's a big bloody mystery," Alisha said,

"Then demystify it, Sergeant. "Talk to the widow again. She's holding back on something."

Alisha said, "Oi could also try her sister, Martha. They seemed pretty close."

Good. Follow that up."

Detective Sergeant Quinn O'Ryan tended to be quiet and observant in his dealings with suspects and witnesses. His partner, Detective Constable Niall Ferguson was much more outgoing, opinionated

and downright cheeky at times. In some ways, the pair complemented each other. At times O'Ryan felt like an older brother looking after his younger sibling, under sufferance.

Arriving at the south-eastern edge of town, they knocked at the door of 21 Furze Hill Road. This area was a new and upmarket suburb with two car garages and water features in the front gardens. According to Department of Social Security rental records, it was where Enya Woodruff lived with Flavia Morgan.

Enya, responding to the insistent knock on her door, opened it and faced the two detectives.

An apparition with long dark hair shot through with grey met the pair. Enya had sharp features and a tongue to match. O'Ryan reckoned she looked like a refugee witch from King Lear.

She pushed her straggly, unkempt hair away from her eyes. "Who are you and what do you want?" she demanded, suspicion oozing.

O'Ryan answered, "DS O'Ryan and DC Ferguson. We believe you know a Flavia Morgan."

"Yes, What about her?"

"We have some terrible news, I'm afraid. Do you mind if we come in, Niall said, stepping over the threshold.

Enya, in a flurry, managed, "Tell me what has happened."

"We discovered Ms Morgan's body in a disused nunnery a day ago. We only just found out who she is," Ferguson stated.

With her eyes darting from one cop to the other, she fiddled with her fingers. "Flavia dead. How?"

"She was murdered."

Enya stared at them, uncomprehending. "No, you've got it all wrong. She can't be dead. She's away, visiting relatives in Carmarthen."

"When did you last see her?" DS O'Ryan asked.

"It would have been about a week ago."

"How do you know she's in Carmarthen?" Ferguson asked.

"Because she sent me this," she explained, retrieving an object on her dining table. She handed Ferguson a small book called the 'Mabinogion'. It had an inscription:

To my Enya. Best wishes and much love from the land of my birth."

DS O'Ryan scratched his head. "If she's visiting Wales how come her body is discovered just over a day ago in the old abandoned nunnery?"

Enya backed off, folding her arms. "You people have made a mistake!"

Ferguson said, "Do you want me to phone a friend to come and stay with you?"

She shook her head. "Flavia is my only close friend here."

O'Ryan said, "We'll need identification of the body. Are you willing to come with us to do that?" He added, "At least you'll know one way or the other."

"What? Now?"

"Yes, the sooner, the better,"

"I'd better grab my coat then." As she opened her closet, she felt a few tears began to gather in the corner of her eyes. No, it couldn't be, her mind screamed.

Chapter 4

Safa Hussaini, one of those people who put 110 percent effort into what they do, looked up from his microscope and rubbed his eyes. Hair and fibre were Dr Hussaini's primary interest in forensic science. He believed crime laboratories now solved more crimes than foot slogging police in investigations. Although, being a private man, he never voiced such opinions in public.

For two days he had been crouched over his microscopes searching for any stray hairs that may have come from the perpetrator of the 'Nunnery murders' the name given to the case. So far he had come up empty. Although hair got classified as dead matter, it still contained DNA. The discovery of hair on the body of a victim or on the clothes of someone who has been the victim of an assault could often be used to determine race and sex. Safa, very private and totally dedicated, never yearned for the company of friends and seemed not to need a social life. He removed his glasses and applied drops to his tired eyes. Blinking to disperse the drops he peered down the eyepiece of a microscope he had set up. The woman's coat, made of coarse fabric, was most likely to trap any hairs or fibres. The young man's leather jacket and the old man's gaberdine mackintosh were less useful as they held no useful clues. Then something caught his eye. Safa adjusted the lens to magnify the item. It looked like a different fibre, one that didn't come from the woman's coat. Her coat was a beige tone; the fibre was red. Safa got up and slouched across to where Allard was still working. "I have discovered a thread not belonging to the garment."

Allard looked up from his paperwork. "That's promising. Show me."

Dr Elwood peered into the microscope. He looked at Dr Hussaini. "Okay, log it. But we can't read too much into it at this point. It could have come from anywhere. A human hair would be much more useful."

Safa Hussaini, round-shouldered from twenty years of crouching over scientific instruments, thought about grandmothers sucking eggs. "We can only work with what's available, Dr Elwood."

"Yes, Safa. Go home and get some rest."

Winter was fast approaching. The stiff easterly breeze from the Atlantic heralded yet more rain, which began lancing down spattering on the windscreen. Alisha turned up her car heater another notch. Rain fell heavily as Detective Sergeant Copperwaite drove along The Quay. The wind blew intermittently from the north, whipping into foam the waves as they crashed on the sandy shore. Casting high their white crests, they seemed to Alisha to be racing after one another.

The Ship and Pilot, one of the oldest pubs in the area, was where Martha had agreed to meet with DS Copperwaite. Alisha was considering eating on the premises but instead walked into a bar where she had difficulty reaching the counter. Surrounded by local drinkers, who seemed to have a sense of an enemy in their midst, Alisha found they were apparently unwilling to move to allow her access. When she eventually got served with one of the many types of cider the bar staff were efficient and pleasant. But the punters gave her a strong feeling that she was encroaching on their space and they didn't like it. The pub was in dire need of some TLC. As Alisha took her seat by the window, she couldn't but help notice the faded swirly patterned carpet, sticky tables and tired decor, all of which was off-putting to her. Alisha, although not the fussiest of people, did still have some standards when it came to interior design. But to be fair, she did enjoy her Ploughman's lunch, as she waited for Martha to show.

Martha Swanson, dressed in dungarees and wearing a baseball cap approached the police officer. She took a seat near a window that gave a view of the cold grey ocean.

Alisha smiled, "DS Copperwaite. We met at your sister's place."

"Yes, I remember you. You were the one who told Mrs Birkbeck the terrible news about Grover."

"Yes, never an easy thing to do."

"So how can I help you?"

"There are a few loose ends to tie up regarding his death. But first, why are we meeting here?"

"I'm fixing up a boat in a shed just down the road."

That's why the work clothes, Alicia thought. She nodded, "Grover's brother knew nothing about his intention to visit him in Israel. But he did send the postcard to Mrs Birkbeck, which Grover had already written. Why would he do that?"

"I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but Grover was an inveterate liar. It was some game to him."

"In what way?"

Martha remained impassive and spoke without showing emotion. "He came over as everybody's friend. Once he had someone's confidence, he fed them wild yarns about his many imagined intrepid experiences."

"So he wasn't to be trusted."

"I certainly didn't believe him. I raised my concerns on many occasions with my sister, but she wouldn't hear anything against him. Jewish wives can be subservient you know."

Alisha swigged her beer. "So what was he up to that got him murdered?"

Martha shrugged, "Who knows, but there was one incident that might shed some light."

"Please tell me."

"One day, when I went to visit my sister, she wasn't home, but he was. He was on the phone and didn't hear me enter." Martha touched Alisha's arm. "I wasn't trying to listen in, but I heard him say he needed more time for something. I couldn't listen to what the caller said, but Grover became agitated and shouted something like, Well you'll just have to wait."

"He needed more time for what? It could have meant anything."

"I know." She finished her beer, saying, "I have to do some more work on the old girl before the light fades. You can walk with me if you like."

The rain had eased to a light drizzle as they walked to The Quay Alisha noticed several rowing boats upside down on the sand.

"Do you think he had borrowed money and couldn't pay it back. That could be a motive."

Martha responded, "That's not good business practice. If you kill them, they can't pay you back."

"You have a point," Alisha chuckled. Noticing they had arrived at the old boathouse, she turned to Martha, "Thanks for giving me this toime. Oi'll let you get back to your work. Oi may have to contact you again and if you think of anything here's my card."

Safa Hussaini had lived in England for most of his life. He had some early childhood memories of being brought up in a community in Palestine. His parents were happy enough working on the land, for wealthy Jews but, as Safa grew up, he thought it demeaning and became increasingly sure that the ways of the old settlements were not for him. He did not want to live, with Jews on top and Arabs working for them. In his youthful idealism, he thought that there shouldn't be employers and employed at all. There must be a better way. The better way for him was to live and study in England. He hadn't been back to Palestine since. A private and shy person, he just got on with the work he loved, seldom socialising with even his colleagues. He was first in the next day and was working on the fibre when Dr Elwood arrived at the lab.

"You been here all night Safa?"

"No. I've been doing some tests on the fibre."

"Have you found any other trace elements?"

"No, but I think this is significant to the case."

"What have you discovered?"

"The thread comes from a Royal Marine uniform dress jacket."

Allard stared at his colleague. "Really?"

"Yes. I'm trying to age it."

"Then our murderer could be in the military."

Safa suggested, "Or associated with it in some way. Maybe he's an aficionado of military memorabilia?"

"Or maybe he only picked the jacket up in a charity shop."

"An officer's dress jacket is unlikely to end up there, Dr Elwood."

"I'll pass on the information about the fibre if you're sure."

"I am."

On the third day of the investigation, DI Dymond arrived at work at 7 am. His team was already assembled in the incident room when he entered. Addressing them, he said, "Okay boys and girls gather around and tell me what you know."

DS Copperwaite said, "I spoke with Martha Swanson, Guv. She's poker-faced, that one. But she didn't like Grover Birkbeck much. She says he was a liar and a bit of a conman."

"That would explain him conning his wife about his trip to Israel. But what the hell was he covering up?" Alan asked. Then he said, "Quinn, how did you go with Enya Woodruff?"

"When I told her about her live-in friend's demise she took it stoically."

"Stoically. Aint that posh, That's not a word you usually find in a copper's notebook," a DC teased."

"We're not all fucking ignoramuses, Den," Quinn retorted."

Alan intervened. "Okay, that's enough you two. Any more ribaldry and you'll both be in detention after class."

Nobody in the room dared mention 'ribaldry'.

“Right, carry on Quinn,”

“When I asked her why she hadn't reported her special friend missing after three days she explained that Flavia Morgan had told her she was going to Wales to see her family.”

Alan became attentive. “Now there seems to be a pattern forming and Oi love patterns. So why would two people say they were going away end up murdered on their home patch?” Then he asked, “Has this live-in friend identified our victim as Flavia Morgan?”

“Yes Guv,” DS O’Ryan said.

“Roight. Now before you go away and bring me, suspects, we have one new piece of forensic evidence. “The boffins have found a red thread on Ms Morgan's coat, which comes from a Royal Marine officers jacket. Now, it's pretty slim, but Oi want you, Denis, to see if there are any military memorabilia shops or collections in this area.”

Denis said, “You can probably get RM jackets on eBay. But Oi don't see why a murderer would wear such a unique article of clothing to kill someone.”

Quinn quipped, “At least you could disguise the blood stains.”

“If there was any blood,” DS Copperwaite commented.

DI Dymond said, “Maybe wearing the jacket was part of the ritual.” Then he had an idea. “Copperwaite go and see Mrs Birkbeck. Foind out if her husband was into military stuff.”

“It's a bit of a long shot, Guv.”

“Have you got something better to do, Sergeant?”

“No Guv.”

“Then don't argue.”

Sometimes Alan's snappiness pissed her off, but she bit her tongue and remained quiet.

Quinn asked, “Shouldn't we check to see if Flavia Morgan did dress-ups with her live-in friend.”

There were a few chuckles at the inference.

DI Dymond scowled. “Al roight, enough of that. Get to your tasks.”

The Military Shop in South Street, Ilfracombe, was run by Ernie Harris, who saw military service in the Falklands. He looked up from a gun magazine as DC Monkhouse entered his cluttered domain. “Can Oi help you?” He said mustering all the enthusiasm he could drum up.

Denis looked at the sallow-faced owner. “DC Monkhouse. Do you deal in military jackets?”

With the prospect of a sale, Ernie brightened. “We have a few in stock. What are you looking for?”

“A Red Royal Marine officers dress jacket.”

The shop keeper's face dropped. “Nothing loike that at the moment. We do have some blue dress coats ...”

“Have you sold any Red ones?”

“The original item is a rare foind. But Oi have sold one or two in the last year.”

“Oi don't suppose you have records of who you sold them to,” Denis said, holding little hope.”

“Not if the customer paid cash, which they mostly do.” He added, “Why are you asking?”

“Police business. Look, are there any other shops loike yours in the area.”

“Not unless you go to the city.”

Denis, deciding the whole thing was a waste of his time, left Ernie Harris to his wares and found a cafe for morning tea.

Alan Dymond stood looking at the photographs of the murder victims. “Who the hell are you?” he said to the picture of the young man. He heard someone enter. It was Chief Inspector Gallagher.

She said, “And how are Dymond's 'dynamic detectives today'? Solving the Nunnery murders, I hope.”

Being equally sarcastic, Alan retorted, “Waiting to hear good news from the 'fantastic forensic findings'.”

Her face became stern. “What have you got for me, after three days of the investigation?”

“The IDs of two of our bodies and red thread.”

“Not much to show for all the resources we have put into this case, inspector.”

“We're following up a couple of new leads today, ma'am.”

“Let's hope they bear fruit.” She turned to leave, then hesitated. “Keep me posted about any new developments, inspector.”

“Yes ma'am,” Alan answered.

DS Copperwaite, back at 64 Fern Way, was walking down the path when she nearly bumped into a man who had risen quickly from a flower bed. “Oh, sorry. Didn't see you there.”

He looked at the beautiful woman, who put him in mind of Ava Gardner, one of his movie star favourites from the Golden Hollywood era. “My fault. wasn't looking where I was going.”

Appraising the man wearing gardening gloves, she said, “Are you a friend of the family?”

“Oh, just helping out. Mrs Birkbeck lost her 'usband recently, you know.”

“Yes, that's why I'm here. DS Copperwaite. Do you know Mrs Birkbeck well?”

“Toby Bennett. So, you're a policewoman.”

“We're all called police officers these days.”

“Oh ah! It's all that PC stuff.”

At first, she thought he meant police constable but quickly realised it was 'politically correct'. “Is Mrs Birkbeck in?”

“Yes, but she's having an 'ard time. My wife is with her.”

“Were you a friend of Mr Birkbeck?”

“Grover. We've known each other for years. We both worked together before we retired.”

“Oh! What work did you do?”

“We were tailors.”

“Tailors! That's interesting,” she said, making a note. “Do you know if he was interested in military stuff?”

He looked at her as with suspicion. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because we want to find out who killed your friend.”

“No, he had enough to do with that stuff at work.”

“What do you mean?”

“We specialised in tailoring for army officers.”

She made another note, bolder this time. “Where did you work?”

“Grieves & Hawkes Military Tailors.”

“Where are they based?”

“Savile Row.”

“London?”

“It's the only one I know of.”

Another note and Alisha felt like someone winning a lottery. Copperwaite felt like doing something mad, letting her hair down. Occasionally the detective would do things on a whim, like swimming with sharks or skydiving. Her friends thought she was reckless, but she sometimes needed the rush to feel alive. She didn't respond to the urge on this occasion. She had to follow up on this new gem of information.

Chapter 5

Something was gnawing at Alan's mind. There was something, staring him in the face, he wasn't addressing. Then he had it. He grabbed his phone and pressed Quinn's contact.

“Yes, Guv.”

“How did the book get sent to Ms Woodruffe, if Flavia Morgan never went to Wales.”

“An excellent question.”

“Well, go and see Ms Woodruffe and find out.”

“She's a weird one. Gives me the creeps.”

“Just do it, Quinn. And tell me straight away.”

Dr Jimbo Barnes came from a long line of medicos. The family tree was fairly bristling with them. But, apart from him, they all tended live people. He was the first to become a pathologist. But then he was out of step with most members of his family. The black sheep they called him. Why a black sheep should be deemed rebellious was beyond him. He was busy prepping a corpse for an autopsy when Philip Ross approached him, excitedly. The cat with the cream look on his face caused Jimbo to respond. “What's got into you?”

“Oi've just discovered something interesting about the youngest John Doe from the nunnery murders.”

“Oh!”

“He has a military tattoo on his roight shoulder.”

“Yes, that's noted in the report.”

“Well Oi did some checking, and it's the motto of the Royal Marines.”

“Yes,” Jimbo responded, unimpressed.

“You have to be a Marine to get one of those. And if our boy was in the RMs, they will have records.”

Jimbo came up short. “You're right. We might be able to find out who he is at last.” He grabbed his phone and rang Alan's number. “Inspector Dymond, our unnamed victim may well have been serving or had served in the Royal Marines.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty much so, and they'll have a way of finding out who he is.”

“Bloody Hell! You're right Jimbo.” With that, Alan terminated the call, determining to carry out this part of the investigation himself, with Alisha to assisting him. The armed forces were a difficult lot to deal with and played their cards very close indeed. Then he realised he hadn't seen DS Copperwaite all day. Where the hell was she, he wondered?

DS O'Ryan felt uneasy talking with Enya Woodruff. He had her down as a witchy lesbian, but that particular 'elephant in the room' stayed concealed. His uneasiness being around the gay woman wasn't a moral issue. It brought back unpleasant memories when his then-wife had walked out on him for another woman. Interviewing the strange woman, he said, “We know that Flavia never got to Wales. So how do you account for receiving the book posted from Carmarthen?”

“I've no idea.”

He rose from his seat. “Who was Flavia supposed to visit.”

“Her brother, Gordon.”

“Do you have his contact details?”

Enya pushed back her straggly hair. “Surely you don't suspect him.”

“As far as I'm concerned everyone's a suspect until proven otherwise.”

“And there's me being under the illusion that we're innocent unless proven guilty.”

“His details, please.”

“Flavia may have them in her room.”

In her room. O'Ryan thought he might have been wrong about her being queer after all. But then many hetero couples sleep in separate beds - him and his ex for one. “Where's her room.”

“It's Flavia's private sanctum. I'll go and look. You stay here.”

He bristled, “This is a murder investigation, and I know what I'm looking for.”

She smiled sweetly. “Getting all alpha on me doesn't work. Now just wait here.”

He took a long deep breath. “Were you and Flavia lovers?”

She scowled at him. “That's also none of your business.”

Alan had just come from the coffee machine armed with an anaemic looking flat white when he bumped into Quinn. “Ah! Oi’ve wanted to catch up with you. How did you get on with finding out about the book?”

“I got a contact number from Ms Woodruffe. I phoned Ms Morgan's brother. He posted it at his sister's request after she'd written her personal message in it.”

He stared at the DS. So she bought it here and sent it to Wales so her brother could send it back to Ms Woodruffe?”

“Yes. What the hell is going on?” Quinn asked.

“We've got two murder victims who covered their tracks by lying to their family, so this seems to have little to do with Grover Birkbeck's nature.”

“I'm stumped, Guv.”

“Go home, Quinn. Come back fresh in the morning.”

After the DS had left, Alan phoned Alisha. “Pick me up at eight tomorrow morning. We're going to Bickleigh Barracks.”

“What for Guv?”

“All will be revealed.”

“Guess what Oi found out today.”

“I don't do guesses DS Copperwaite, especially when Oi'm bloody tired.”

“When Oi got to Mrs Birkbeck's place an old cockney guy was doing some weeding for her. it turns out that he and Grover worked as tailors before they retired.”

“And this is interesting because?”

“They worked for a firm in London that specialised in military dress uniforms.”

Alan became alerted. “Now that is interesting. Well done Sergeant. London you say. Oi used to work at West End Central. Oi know a couple of coppers who still work there. They could be useful.”

“Guv, Oi'd loike to follow this one up.”

“And Oi'd like to win the football pools. I have to put my resources where I think they're most useful and I want you with me tomorrow.”

“Why can't Quinn go with you?”

“Because we're going to visit the fucking Navy and you're better for the job. End of.”

Chapter 6

RM Bickleigh, Alan found was located in the village of Bickleigh some 8-9 miles North East of Plymouth City Centre. Home to 42 Commando RM, the location was chosen for its proximity to Dartmoor, with its ideal training areas and ranges and to Plymouth for secure maritime access. As he and DS Copperwaite drove up to the checkpoint arm that blocked the road, a sentry in camouflage fatigues approached his car.

“Can I help you sir?” he said politely.”

“Yes. You can direct us to your commanding officer.”

“And who are you?”

Dymond flashed his warrant card.

“And why are you here?”

“Police business, soldier. And we'd loike to get on with it.”

While a second guard prevented them from entering the base, the sentry checked a clipboard he got from a small booth. He looked in the car at DI Dymond. “You're not on the visitor's list.”

With agitation building, Alan stared at the soldier. “Just phone his office and tell Colonel, what's his name, that the police are here in a murder inquiry and would like his assistance.”

Sentry one turned to sentry two. “You'd better phone him.”

“Yes, you had,” Dymond said, as the soldier went back to his booth.

He returned and said, “Carry on past the parade ground. Turn left at the flagpole and park in the visitor's car park. You will be met there and taken to Captain Fanning's office.” He handed Alan a sheet of paper. “This is a map of the base with guidelines. Make sure you stick to them.”

A guard lifted the boom gate, and the police drove through.

“It's good to know their security is tight,” Alisha said, as Alan followed the instructions. Then she said, “You still haven't explained why we're here.”

“Because it seems that our third victim was a Royal Marine Commando.”

A Red Cap met them at the car park. “Follow me, sir,” was all he said, giving a disparaging look to Alisha. As far as the military police officer was concerned, this was a male's domain. One of the old school who didn't think women should be allowed in the armed forces, he showed his disdain. The police followed him into a building, to an office marked 'Capt W Fanning'. The Red Cap knocked and entered. Saluting, he announced, “The police to see you, sir.”

The Captain, tall and sporting a pencil-thin moustache, rose to his full height. “How can the Navy help the police?”

Alan said, “DI Dymond and DS Copperwaite. We're investigating a murder. The victim has a Royal Marine tattoo. Apart from that, he has no ID. We would loike to know who he is and hope you can furnish us with that information, captain.” He turned to DS Copperwaite. “Give him the picture, sergeant.”

She did so, wondering about his officious behaviour.

The Marine officer glanced at it. He scoffed, “Is that all you have to go on, inspector?”

“Don't you keep photographs of all your soldiers.”

“Sailors actually,” he smirked. And to answer your question, no, we don't keep them here.”

“You'd be able to access them on a computer though?”

“With just this to go by it could take some time,”

“Alroight, we'll go to the mess, and my sergeant can foind me a noice cuppa, while your people find out who he is.”

Captain Fanning said, “We do have more important things to do you know.”

“What's more important than finding out why one of your men was murdered?”

“Very well, I'll see what I can do.” Fanning sighed, reluctance showing in his voice.

“Perhaps you can get someone to point us to the mess,” Alan smiled.

DC Denis Monkhouse, a 'hail fellow well met' type irked Niall Ferguson at times, mostly because of his cynical outlook on life conflicted with that of his colleague. Niall detested those 'glass half full' people who put on a false positive front. Denis, on the other hand, looked upon the pessimists as lesser beings, more to be pitied than hated. He asked Niall, “Where's the Guv gone?”

Niall, the only other person in the incident room, said, “Dunno, but Alisha has gone with him.”

“Why's it so hush, hush?”

“Maybe they have it off in some motel room.”

The boss and her together. That's not a pretty picture.” Then Quinn said, “It seems like we're partnered up today.”

“Jesus, that's all Oi need.”

“I'm not that thrilled myself. But we have to make the best of it.”

Niall sighed, “So what are we supposed to be doing?”

Denis said, “We've got to go to London.”

“London! I hate the fucking place.”

“We have to go and visit a tailors shop.”

“Why?”

“If you'd been at this morning's briefing, you'd know.”

“I had a personal matter to attend to.”

Denis said, “Our Alisha found out that Grover Birkbeck used to work there with a mate from the 'smoke'. And get this, they specialised in making fancy military clobber.”

“What's that got to do with anything?”

“The Guv thinks it might have something to do with the bit of red thread.”

“It's a bit thin.”

“Yeah, loike the thread.”

Niall cringed at Denis' poor wit. “Anyway, I thought you were interested in this army memorabilia stuff. Didn't you use to have a shop?”

“Oi used to buy and sell authentic military gear when Oi dropped out of uni. Oi set up an online business with a mate. 'Military Collectables' we called it.”

“Then you became a cop.”

“Yes, for my sins.”

As they drank mess coffee, Alisha said, “So why did you bring me here, Guv?”

“You want to know the truth?”

“That would be helpful.”

“They don't like women with authority.”

“Oi know that. Did you see the look that Red Cap gave me?”

“Well, me telling you what to do fits in with their idea of the natural order of things.”

She looked at him. “You mean keep the little woman barefoot and pregnant?”

“That's one way of putting it,” he grinned.

“You arrogant bastard! Oi bet you're enjoying my humiliation.”

“Relax Sergeant; it's only an act.”

“Well Oi'm not here as fodder for their fucking chauvinism.” She slumped back in her seat, firmly crossing her arms.

Just then, the Red Cap approached. “The captain is ready for you now.”

“Let's go, sergeant,” Alan said, with a sadistic smile.

Alisha mouthed, “fuck you,” and followed him out of the mess.

As he entered his office, Captain Fanning smiled, “We think we've worked out who your man is.”

“Your man, don't you mean?” Alan retorted.

“Not since he left the Marines two years ago. He is, we believe, Corporal Mason Thomas. He contracted malaria while on exercises overseas. That's why he left the armed services.”

Alan took the print-out with blanked out words. “Thank you, captain. You've been a great help.”

As they drove off the base, Alan phoned Dr Barnes. “Jimbo, DI Dymond here. We're pretty sure we have a name for you, John Doe.”

“So he was in the Army?”

“Navy. But can you tell me? Did he have malaria?”

“Malaria? Well, we didn't pick it up in the autopsy.”

“Could you have missed it?”

“Post-mortem identification of malaria in non-endemic countries is challenging.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“We don't often encounter cerebral malaria because the infection is rarely documented ante-mortem.”

“Did he have malaria or not.” Alan pressed, agitated.

“It's not that simple. The deceased may have contracted the disease, but post-mortem diagnosis of malaria is often only done when there is a suspicion based on anamnesis or available medical information.”

“Anamnesis! What's that?”

“A preliminary case history of a medical or psychiatric patient.”

“What if the Marines gave us a copy of his medical history?”

“I doubt you'd get it. Besides, unfortunately, medical records are generally incomplete, unreliable or absent when we admit bodies to the mortuary for medico-legal investigations.”

Alan, frustrated said, “Okay, Jimbo, you've told me what you can't do. Now tell me what you can do?”

“Tests can be carried out but not here. We'll have to send samples to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. They can carry out tests to enhance malaria diagnostic in areas with limited diagnostic facilities or poor experience, such as us. Tests are based on the detection of different malaria proteins.”

“Then, get on with it.”

“Are the police going to foot the bill?”

Alan hadn't thought of that. “Get me a quote ASAP.”

“It's not going to be cheap, inspector.”

“It never fucking is.”

“So what's our boy's name?”

“Corporal Mason Thomas.”

Chapter 7

Savile Row, a street in Mayfair, central London, was known principally for its traditional bespoke tailoring for men. It was for this reason that Niall and Denis found themselves looking for a firm called Grieves & Hawkes Military Tailors. DS Mike Tallow met the pair outside the Royal Geographical Society at 1 Savile Row. Tallow, greeting the two DCs he said, “So you're Dymond's boys. Is he still a cantankerous old bastard?”

Niall, smirked, “Nothing much has changed there.”

The seasoned cop said, “I remember being under him as a raw recruit. Dymond always used to give me the shit jobs.”

“Yeah, like having to traipse up to fucking London to visit a tailor shop,” Niall complained.

“So what is this visit to our great city all about?”

Niall said, “A bit of fucking red thread found on the coat of a murder victim.”

“Isn't it always,” DS Tallow grinned. Then he said, “All joking aside your Guvnor is a Dymond by name as well as by nature. He's got his quirky ways, but he is solid. You won't get a better one than him when it comes to defending his troops. That's why he's never gotten further up the promotion ladder.”

Uncomfortable talking out of school, Denis said. “So where's this shop?”

Grieves and Hawkes, bespoke tailors to the military, was located at number 3 Savile Row. The grand looking establishment, with the opulence and feeling of a gentleman's club, made Niall feel very out of place. Mike Tallow took the lead and approached a smartly dressed man with a tape measure around his neck. “DS Tallow and colleagues. We're here on a police investigation.”

Taking one look at the trio, the tailor said, "Well dears I didn't think you were clients."

Niall said, "This is a murder investigation. The victim used to work here."

"What's his name?"

"Grover Birkbeck. He was a tailor here."

"Before my time, I'm afraid. You need to talk to Mr Grieve's junior."

"Can you get him for us?" Mike said.

The tailor tutted, "Very well. Wait here." he gave them a look as though he had just discovered something disgusting on the bottom of his shoe.

After a couple of minutes, he came back with another man in tow. The man, who's beaked nose and a waddling walk put Denis in mind of a penguin, said, "I'm Samuel Grieves. I believe you are policemen. How can I help you?"

"We're investigating the murder of one of your former employees - Grover Birkbeck," Niall explained.

"Grover Birkbeck - murdered!"

"Yes."

"What a tragedy. Such skill is exceedingly rare. A significant loss when Grover retired. But I haven't seen him for years, so I don't know how I can help you."

"We discovered a red thread at the scene of the crime. It came from the jacket of a Royal Marine officer. Do you make such garments?"

"Yes, we provide dress uniforms for all the services, but I still don't see how that helps."

Denis said, "The murderer was wearing such a jacket."

Niall, knowing his colleague's penchant for exaggeration, corrected. "We believe somebody at the scene of the crime wore a Royal Marine jacket."

Samuel Grieves gave a weak smile. "We have no control over what happens to our garments once they leave the shop."

Mike said, "Of course. Thank you for your assistance."

"Wait a minute. I haven't finished," Niall objected. "Did you know Mr Birkbeck well?"

"Of course. We worked together for many years."

"Did he collect military stuff as a hobby?"

Samuel tapped his nose. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this; he swore me to secrecy."

"If you know of anything that can help us to catch his killer you are duty bound to tell us." Denis pointed out.

"He had a secret hobby. His wife hated anything to do with the military, so he had to keep it private."

"What secret?" Niall asked, getting impatient.

“He kept a collection of our seconds.” He qualified this, saying, “As bespoke tailors, we destroy any garments not up to our fastidious standards. We allowed Grover to keep them, provided he didn't sell them.”

“Where did he keep them, Niall pressed.”

Samuel Grieves shook his head. “He never told me.”

Shit! The investigation had hit a brick wall. In desperation, Niall said, “Is there anybody else that might know where he stashed them?”

“If anybody knew about his hobby it would have to be Toby, his friend who also worked for us. He's retired now too.”

“Toby who?”

“Bennett. That's his name.”

“Where can we find this Toby Bennett?”

The senior tailor shook his head again. “I have no idea. Now I do have to get back to work. So if that's all, gentlemen.”

DS Copperwaite and DS O'Ryan arrived in Molecat Cross, a small hamlet on the B3343. Alisha looked up directions to the Thomas farm. It was 6:30 pm and already dark. It looked like being another late night. “Where the hell is this bloody farm?” she asked, fed up.

Quinn opened his door. “Looks like the pub over there,” he said, pointing in the direction of the only building lit up in the village.

“So you're sliding off for a quick half?” she said, accusingly.

“Sliding off for local knowledge. For all, we know Mr Thomas could be in there himself,”

“Forget it. They'll smell pork a mile off and clam up.” Pointing at the map, she said, “There's Thomas Lane. What's the betting his great great grandfather had it named after him?”

“And if it's not the roight place?”

“We implement your plan.”

There had been some cold, drizzly rain and remnants of puddles splattered her freshly cleaned Ford. The small farmhouse, isolated and in darkness was at the end of a long muddy drive. The rain had started again, enough for the wiper blades to sweep across the windscreen intermittently. As they neared the farmhouse, they saw light escaping from a gap in the curtains in just one room. Now came the awkward bit. It was always tricky telling people they had lost a loved one, but when it was a child who had died, it was heart-wrenching. Alisha kept telling herself she was just delivering a message, but she didn't believe it. Her knock on the wooden door elicited staccato barking from some dog. A woman's voice berated the creature, which was only doing what it had been trained to do. The door opened revealing a large, blousy woman with flour-spattered hands, which she wiped on her apron.

“What do you want?” she asked abruptly, eyeing the two strangers.

“Are you Mrs Thomas?” Alisha asked.

“Yes, but what's it to you?” The farmer's wife asked suspiciously.

“Mrs Thomas we're from the police. Oi'm DS Copperwaite, and this is DS O'Ryan. May we come in?”

“What for?”

“Oi'm afraid we have some bad news. Is there a Mr Thomas around?”

“Why? What's happened?” the woman asked, fear showing in her eyes. “Is it about Mason? Has he had an accident?”

Alisha said, “Is there a Mr Thomas at home?”

“Over in the dairy.”

“We need him here as well,” Alisha said.

“He has to milk the cows. Can't just leave them.”

Alisha, silently cursing herself for her bad timing, couldn't keep the woman in suspense any longer. “May we come in, please?”

Mrs Thomas moved aside, and the police officers entered.

The farmer's wife had to sit down. “Now what's this all about?” she asked, warily.

DS Copperwaite showed her the photo of Mason Thomas. “Is this your son?”

“Yes. What's happened to my boy.”

Alisha braced herself. “Oi'm sorry to inform you that we found Mason dead four noights ago. He had no identity on him, and we only found out who he is today.” She paused, noting the look of shocked disbelief on the woman's face. She said, “Oi'm sorry for your loss.”

Mrs Thomas went stiff. “My - son - dead,” she muttered, uncomprehending. Then she burst into tears.

Alisha's instinct was to comfort the bereft mother, but she had to remain professional. “We need to tell your husband. Is there any way you can contact him?”

The farm woman, usually robust and vigorous, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. “Sorry, Oi don't usually fall to pieces like that.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Alisha crooned.

She reached for a short-band two-way radio on the coffee table. “Fred, you need to come to the house. The police are here about Mason.”

She looked at the female detective, her eyes glistening with tears. “He's on his way.”

There was an uneasy silence in the air. DS O'Ryan spoke for the first time since he'd arrived, “Is there anyone we can call to give you support?” It was straight from the police manual.

Alisha shot him a look, thinking Quinn was a useless waste of space in the situation. Alisha said, “Did your son tell you he was going away anywhere?”

“He said he was meeting up with some of his army friends at some reunion.”

“Do you happen to know where?”

Just then a stocky man, in overalls entered the room. Shedding his gumboots, he said, “what's this about?”

Mrs Thomas said, "Mason is dead." She burst into tears again.

Fred Thomas said, "Dead! What do you mean?"

"We discovered his body four noights ago," Alisha said.

"Then you've made a mistake. We got a letter from Mason just two days ago, saying everything was okay."

"Can Oi see the letter?" she asked.

He went and got it.

Alisha read it. It followed the pattern of the previous two. She showed Mr Thomas the picture. Is this your son?"

"It looks like him but as Oi said ..., " Fred responded angrily.

"We'll need one of you to identify the body."

"Damn you, woman! Oi said it couldn't be him."

Things weren't going well. Following the police, manual wasn't going to cut it. "Oi hope, for your sake, you're roight, Mr Thomas. But we need you to see the body make sure. If he's not your son, we have to foind out who he is. Will you help us, please? We can pick you up tomorrow morning."

Mrs Thomas looked at her husband. "We have to find out, Fred."

Alisha said, can we borrow the letter?"

"Why?" he asked brusquely.

"Because it will help us with our enquires."

He gingerly handed it over.

Chapter 8

At the next morning's briefing, Chief Inspector Doreen Gallagher sat in as an observer. Alan addressed his team. Pointing at each victim, in turn, he said, "So far we have a retired Jewish tailor, murdered on our patch, who was supposed to be in Israel. Next, we have a middle-aged lesbian who, instead of being in Wales, is also killed in our locale. Foinally we have a former male sailor in the Royal Marines, also murdered when he was supposed to be away at a military reunion. The only clue we have that binds them together, apart from the fact they were all left in the nunnery, is a red thread. We now know that Grover Birkbeck made military dress uniforms. We also know that Mason Thomas was going to attend a military reunion." He scanned his team. "O'Ryan, foind out about that reunion. We want to know if they wore red dress uniform jackets. Copperwaite, we need to foind out where Grover Birkbeck keeps his military uniform collection. Talk to Toby Bennett again. Monkhouse, I want you to speak to Enya Woodruff. Foind out if Flavia Morgan had any connection with the military. We've got to get onto this so, chop! Chop! Alan turned to Doreen Gallagher. "Do you want to add anything, Ma'am?"

"No. Carry on DI Dymond."

"Roight, let's get to it," he said, clapping his hands together.

Alisha Copperwaite called around Mrs Birkbeck's and asked where Toby Bennet was?

Mrs Birbek, her eyes still red and swollen, called out, "Bonnie, do you know where Toby went. There's a policewoman here to see him."

Stair descending noises preceded the appearance of a fat bottle-blonde woman wearing bright pink lipstick. She seemed flustered.

Alisha announced, "DS Copperwaite. Oi need to speak with your husband."

The large woman pushed in front of her friend. Knowing her hubby was no angel and had had a few brushes with the law in the past, she became defensive. "What do you want him for?"

"There's no need for you to be concerned. We spoke the other day. Oi have a couple of questions for him. That's all."

"He's gone to the gardening centre."

"Roight. Where is it?"

"Just down the road, right at the beginning," Bonnie said, pointing.

"Thank you," Alisha smiled.

Adams Back Yard Centre, much like any other Alisha had seen, sold gardening tools, soil additives and outdoor furniture, as well as the usual wide variety of plants. As a journalist for a local rag in the old days, Alisha had to cover flower shows and other rural pursuits. So she got to know a bit about gardening, although she had little spare time in which to do it. She noticed Toby by his craggy, lived-in face. He was loading some mulch onto a trolley. "Mr Bennett, I need to speak with you."

Seeing the attractive woman police officer, who reminded him of his Hollywood heartthrob from the silver screen days, he responded, "Bloody 'ell, if it ain't Ava come back to see me."

Having no idea why he called her that, she said, "We spoke with Samuel Grieves. He told the detectives that Grover had a military uniform collection. You didn't tell me about that the other day."

"Well, you didn't ask me."

Not listening to him, she continued, "He told me that any uniforms with even the slightest imperfection got destroyed. But Grover was allowed to keep them for his private collection. So my question is, why would the fastidious Mr Grieves allow such an oversight?"

"You'll have to ask 'im that."

"As Grover's close friend and colleague, Oi'm asking you."

"Well, I didn't know anything about it."

"That's not what Mr Grieves told us."

He snapped, "What did that little fag say to you?"

"He told my colleagues that you were acutely aware of Grover's clandestine activities. What would he have to gain by telling us that if it isn't true?"

Toby shrugged, "Like I said, you'll have to ask 'im."

"Oh come on, Toby. Don't mess us around. We can charge you with obstructing the police." She looked him in the eye. "I know he kept it secret from his war phobic wife but he's dead now, and by

assisting us you're helping us catch his killer. So why don't we have a cup of tea, and you can tell me about it."

Despite sharing a pot of Earl Grey tea with the attractive policewoman, Toby Bennett still admitted nothing.

Alisha persisted. "All Oi need to know is the whereabouts of the collection,"

"Why's it important?"

She leant towards him. "I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but we found a red thread at the scene of the croime in the nunnery. It came from a red woollen Royal Marine officer's jacket. By comparing the thread with the clothes in Grover's collection, we hope to find a match."

Toby's eyebrows arched. "So you think someone was wearing the jacket when they murdered Grover?"

"We have to look at all possible scenarios. So where is the collection?"

"Wherever poor old Grover hid it. God rest his soul."

"Come on," she said, nudging him, "you can do better than that."

Toby sighed, "He'll probably curse me forever. I won't tell you. I'll show you where it is. But only you, mind. I don't want coppers all over the joint-damaging the goods."

She put down her cup. "Withholding evidence is a chargeable offence, and we make the rules where gathering evidence is concerned. However, Oi will agree to your conditions, but we have to go today. So where is this collection?"

"Where do you reckon, detective? London of course."

Niall Ferguson called into the George and Dragon pub on Fore Street. Mike Stanton, the landlord, had the Royal Marines badge enlarged over the open fireplace in the snug. Niall knew Mike from way back in their orphanage days. Both young boys found the hard, loveless environment of the home difficult. They soon became the best of friends in that hostile environment, looking out for each other. Although their closeness as mates had waned over the years, they still helped each other out when they could. As Niall entered the bar, the only two punters at that time of day, engrossed in whatever topic, hardly cast him a glance.

Mike grinned, "Look what the cat's dragged in. So what's your poison these days, Niall?"

"Thanks for the offer, Mike, but I'm here on police business, so I have to say no."

"Go on, have a half. Nobody here's going to dob you in".

"All right, but I need five minutes of your valuable time."

Mike turned around, booming, in his Sergeant Major voice, "Gwen, look after the bar for a few minutes, there's a love."

Seated with a half of bitter each, Mike said, "So what do you need help with?"

"There was an RM reunion recently. A Mason Thomas was supposed to be there but couldn't make it."

"Can't say I've heard of him. But why does it matter to you?"

"He was a corporal at RM Bickleigh."

Mike laughed, "It's a while since I was there."

"That's not my reason for being here. I need to know where ex-Marines would stage reunions around here."

"Well, I have them here from time to time."

"Any recently?"

"We had a few of the lads in about three weeks ago."

"Did any of them wear red jackets?"

Mike laughed again. "Most of them wore officers' dress tunics."

"Were they all officers?"

"None of them were. NCOs at best but mostly privates."

"Then why the officer's redcoats?"

"A bit of Navy hi-jinks, that's all."

"Where'd they get the uniforms?"

The landlord shrugged, "Buggered if I know, eBay maybe?"

"I need to know who was here, Who organised the event?"

"That'd be Sergeant Lloyd Hunt."

"I need to talk to him. Do you have a contact number?"

"Yeah. I'll get it. Then I'd better get back to the bar."

Beau Durand had always been self-conscious about his looks, especially his ears, which stood out like handles on an ancient Grecian Urn. Used to jibes About him being 'Prince Charles' love child and Dumbo Durand' he brushed them off while seething inside. At first, the reporter tried gaining the respect of fellow journalists by going that extra mile to secure a good story for the Exeter Clarion. But they just thought he was a brown noser, with big ears. Then he found a source, an insider with the police, and his standing in the pecking order changed in his favour. It was always a dangerous business treading on the police's toes, but he couldn't shirk his responsibility as a journalist. Looking at the man he had met by lamplight, like some cloak-and-dagger spy from a 50's thriller, he said, "I'm always curious when a cop feeds me inside info."

Niall, standing, hands deep in his coat pockets, said, "You know what curiosity did to the cat."

"Lucky Oi'm not a pussy. So what gives?"

"What do you know about the three murders in the last week?"

"Only what we've been given to report. Why, is there something your lot isn't telling us?" he said, in mock disbelief.

"They were all found together."

"What, at the same time?"

Niall nodded.

“So why were they killed?”

“We don't know the answer to that one, but there seems to be a link to the Royal Marines.”

“What sort of connection?”

Niall put out his hand. “What about the wedge?”

Beau handed him over fifty quid. “Now give.”

Forensics discovered a thread from a red military jacket at the scene. One of the deceased, Mason Thomas was in the Royal Marines.”

“Thanks, mate. This info should raise a few questions.”

“Don't mention me or that will be the end of my tip-offs.”

Beau Durand winked. “Don't worry mate. It'll be something like 'a source close to the investigation' etc.”

After Durand had left, Niall Ferguson pondered his dilemma. He'd had a bit too much to drink the night he met Beau Durand. Somehow he'd let slip that he thought the police brass were also secretive about aspects of cases the public had a right to know. Beau's face had lit up, like a forty-niner who'd hit the mother lode. The next day Niall realised to his horror what he'd done. His loose lips could well wreck his career. He's wanted to be a policeman as far back as he could remember. He'd joined the police, as a cadet, shortly after leaving school. His father had warned him about his surly attitude and lack of respect for authority. Now it had set him on a perilous path. If he didn't keep feeding the beast, it would consume him. Beau Durand had him dangling on a hook.

Chapter 9

As Denis drove up to the boatyard, he saw many row boats, abandoned in differing states of repair, lying upside down along the pebbly beach beyond the high tide mark. Winter was a busy time for the fisher folk as they maintained and repaired their boats in readiness for the coming fishing season. But all the ships had not been abandoned, though. DC Monkhouse heard the harsh noise of a circular saw coming from inside a rusty shed. He ventured to look inside. The sound was deafening. Unable to converse verbally Denis flashed his warrant card, and the ear-piercing racket abated. He had no idea who it was under the earmuffs and protective goggles. “Hi. Oi'm looking for Enya Woodruff.”

She raised her goggles away from her eyes. Watching the detective's cheerful face, she said, “Who was it that ratted me out?”

“So you're her?”

“Yes. Who are you?”

“DC Monkhouse. Oi need to ask you some questions about Flavia Morgan.”

She sighed heavily. “I've been all through that with another one of your lot.”

“This is different.”

She looked at his warm, open face and figured he looked honest enough. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Did Flavia have any connection with the military?”

“That's a strange question. What does it have to do with..?”

Interrupting, he said, "So she did have a connection or not."

"She was once married to a soldier."

"Oh, what happened?"

"She got fed up with being shunted from post to post. She wanted her life back."

"How long ago was this?"

Enya picked up a plane and began smoothing a piece of wood. "We met around five years ago. It would have been a year or so before that when they separated."

"You said she was married to a soldier. Do you know which regiment?"

"No. It didn't interest me."

"Did Flavia keep any photos from that time?"

"Your people have been all over the house. You'd best ask them."

"We didn't come up with anything about the case."

"Well, there you are then, DC Monkhouse. Now I have to get back to work."

Damn! He was losing her. He had to pull a rabbit out of the hat quickly. "What about the things the police didn't find. Personal mementoes she would have stored in a safe place."

"If she kept such things I know nothing about them."

He smiled, winningly, "So where would you conceal such intimate stuff?"

She smiled back, "You want to come round and look, don't you?"

"It may help us catch Flavia's killer."

She thought about it. "Okay, I'll meet you there in thirty minutes."

He turned to leave. Then, in real Lieutenant Columbo style, he turned around, saying, "One other thing. Do you know a woman called Martha Swanson?"

"We are acquainted. Martha sometimes gives me a hand fixing up this yacht."

Denis grinned, "And go sailing off into the sunset together."

"That is the aim – yes."

Almost everything about DCI Doreen Gallagher cried out style. From her designer hair to her Gucci Shoes she was the envy of most of her female colleagues. How could she do it on her salary? They would say. Was she on the take, protecting some big crime lord? The truth was that Arnold Gallagher, her husband of ten years, was a very successful Exeter dentist. As she kept her private life to herself, few of her colleagues were even aware she was married. Doreen was well mindful of the fact that the higher you climb the greasy pole of promotion the more you become married to the job. A job in which she was one of the few female officers to make it to the rank of Detective Chief Inspector. With her promotion came the move to Ilfracombe nick. She contemplated this as DI Dymond entered her office. "Hello, Alan. How are you today?"

She didn't usually greet him like this. Something was amiss. He could feel it. "Foine, how are you?" The words were inevitable, but he soon regretted falling into her crude trap. She threw the paper at him, disgust in her voice. "Have you read today's paper, inspector?"

“No, not yet.”

“Well, you need to. Some weasel has been blabbing to the press about our triple murder.”

The front page headline read 'What the police are not telling us'.”

Doreen spat, “They make it look as though we are holding back on a dirty little secret.”

“With respect ma'am, they were bound to find out sooner or later. I'm not sure why we kept it from the papers.”

She stared at him, removing her Pierre Cardin spectacles. “I wanted to announce it in my own time; once your people have some idea regarding the motive for the crime. Now, 'a source close to the incident' has made us look like guilty incompetents. Your task is to find out who is responsible and let me know.”

“Yes, ma'am. Now, if that's all I have to brief my team,” Alan said, rising to leave.

“You'd better have an answer, DI Dymond, by 5 o'clock, because you're going to front a media press conference about this.”

Excited chatter filled the incident room as DI Dymond strolled in. He marched up to the message board, brandishing a rolled up newspaper. “Shut up you lot.”

The room quietened down.

“Right, Oi've just had a meeting with DCI Gallagher because of some traitor, as she put it, has been blabbing to the press.” He paused for a moment to let it sink in, then added, “So my question is was it one of you lot?”

Many “Nos” and shakes of the head followed.

“Oi didn't think so, but Oi had to ask the question.”

“Who could it have been sir? “Niall asked.”

“If Oi knew that and if it were one of you lot they'd be out on their arse in a flash. Now Oi've been given the task of fronting the bloody media vultures later today.”

“Maybe it was the anonymous witness who reported the crime?” DS Copperwaite proffered.

“Maybe our witness was also the murderer,” Denis suggested.

Alan knew that some murderers unconsciously wanted to point the police to their crime. If we hadn't been called out because of a disturbance in the disused nunnery, we moight not have found the bodies for weeks. “It's an angle we haven't yet pursued.”

Denis said, “By the way, Guv, it turns out that Martha Swanson and Enya Woodruff know each other.”

Alan rubbed his chin. “So the sister of one of the murder victims knows a friend of another one.”

“Yes, Guv.” It could just be a coincidence, but Oi don't believe in them.”

“Yes, well don't worry about that for now. Oi want you to find out who the mystery witness is. Now, where are we on the Flavia Morgan case?”

Denis said, “Enya Woodruff told me Flavia used to be married to a soldier. She showed me a little hidey hole in their house where Flavia kept her mementoes. She had letters from her husband to be, while he was serving overseas and some photos of their courting days. He wasn't a soldier, though.”

Alan said, "Let me guess. He was in the Royal Marines."

"You must be psychic," Denis laughed.

"There seems to be some military angle connecting the victims."

"Yes Guv," Niall said, "I spoke to a landlord mate of mine who used to be an RM himself. He holds military reunions at his pub. He had one a few weeks back in which NCOs and privates dressed up as officers in Red dress jackets."

"Now that could be useful. Well done, O'Ryan. Follow that up today." Turning to Alisha, he said, "How did you go with Tommy Bennett?"

"Toby Bennett, SIR," she said with the emphasis on sir."

He sighed. Alisha still hadn't gotten over the business at the Navy base. "What did he have to say for himself."

"He's taking me to London to see the collection, today."

Alan's eyes raised. "Great! That's a significant breakthrough. But Oi think Oi should come with you."

She shook her head. "He'll only take me if Oi'm alone."

"She's just after a dirty day out in the smoke in some sleazy hotel," Niall Ferguson teased.

"You must be kidding. Bennet's 75 if he's a day," Copperwaite retorted.

"Some women are into older men." O'Ryan added, keeping up the banter."

"That's enough children," Alan said. "Now get out there and bring me some good news. It's high time we started getting suspects in here."

The old lock up garage, in Whitechapel, looked much like any of the others in the row. Toby turned the key in the lock, while Alisha looked on. The journey from Devon to London had taken just over four hours, with one stop for coffee in Bristol. Toby, excited by Alisha's presence, was full of it, regaling her with stories of his childhood, especially about how his dysfunctional parents left him in charge of his younger siblings and the sort of mischief they used to make. The door opened, and they stepped inside. Hanging racks filled with cellophane covered military uniforms, lined the interior walls. They looked pristine, lined up like dry cleaned items awaiting reunion with their owners. Alisha asked, "Are there any Royal Marine officer dress jackets here?"

"Is this what you're looking for?" he said, indicating beautiful scarlet jackets with white shirts and bow ties."

"Oi need to get them bagged and tested by our people. They'll be able to see if the thread we have as evidence came from any of these."

"I seriously doubt it. These things have been locked up in here for years. So whoever killed Grover couldn't have worn one of these jackets?"

"You moight well be roight, Mr Bennett. But we still have to check."

He turned to her. "But I'm the only one who knows about his place." His rheumy eyes widened, "Surely you don't think I murdered him."

"Toby, there's something I need to tell you."

“What's that?”

“We discovered two other bodies with that of your friend.”

He stared at her. “What the woman and the soldier I heard about on the news?”

“Yes, they were all found dead together. So unless you killed all three, which Oi seriously doubt, you're not in the frame. But my Guvnor may need to question you formally.”

“Me and 'im were like brothers. I couldn't have 'armed him no more than I could cut off me own arm.”

She sighed. “Now we have to load this lot in my car.”

Denis Monkhouse was brought up to believe in God. But after being caught up in an un-winnable war in Afghanistan, and seeing his best friend blown apart by a landmine, he couldn't bear to think a God would let such things happen. Denis came back from war as an atheist and worked to cut a deal with black marketeers smuggling military equipment out of Afghanistan. When he found out he dealt in stolen goods, he blew the whistle on the thieves, in return for immunity from any charges. Special Branch cut a deal, and he was allowed to join the police. None of his colleagues was aware of his history. Not wanting anyone to start delving into his chequered past, Denis happily carried out the drudge jobs without a fuss. Trying to find out who had reported the murders was one such task.

So Denis found himself outside a public phone box in Queens Road, looking for any surveillance cameras that might have picked up the caller entering or leaving the cabinet. Having found out the phone box used for the call, it was a matter of carrying out old-fashioned police work. The telephone exchange registered the call at 11:14 pm. The likelihood of anybody seeing the caller was slim at best. Denis sighed, He still had to go through the motions, door knocking and asking irrelevant questions. He didn't even have an image of the caller, but maybe someone somewhere had seen the man exit the nunnery. He needed a coffee to motivate him to carry out the onerous task ahead.

He found a small cafe in Queens Road. It was mostly empty, allowing him to sit quietly drinking coffee and partaking of a blueberry muffin while writing down some notes:

First, What was the caller doing in the nunnery? It was private property and boarded up so whatever he was doing it was probably illegal. That would account for him making an anonymous call.

Secondly, why would he bother to make the call at all? If he was up to no good why bring attention to himself by phoning the police. Unless of course he was the murderer and wanted to play some perverse game with the police.

Strangely it was the only scenario that made any sense. Denis decided he was looking for the killer, not some nervous Samaritan type.

Queens Road was an up-market, leafy suburb with designer homes. Of these Denis considered only four dwellings worth canvassing. They were the only ones with windows affording a view of the nunnery. Now, with a plan, Denis approached the first of the four homes. Chimes with the sophistication of a mobile ring-tone assaulted his ears. A man wearing a cardigan and puffing on a pipe came to the door. Looking at Denis as though he were something unpleasant stuck to the sole of a shoe, he said, “Yes. Can I help you?”

“Oi'm with the police. DC Monkhouse. Oi'm investigating a crime that was discovered foive days ago around 11 pm at the nunnery, across the road. Oi was wondering if you heard any disturbance at that time.”

"I would have been well and truly asleep by then. So no, I cannot help you."

"Just one question, can you see the nunnery from your window?"

"Yes, but I cannot help you, Sorry."

The door closed.

A large barking dog was the sole occupier at one of the remaining dwellings. Another was the home of an octogenarian couple who could hardly hear or see very much at all. But Denis' fourth call proved much more promising. The modern house belonged to a retired headmaster and his wife. Beryl Bevis came to the door with a small terrier in tow. She looked at the stranger. "What do you want?"

"Oi'm DC Monkhouse. Oi'm here in connection with an incident at the old nunnery."

"Oh, so they've sent someone at last."

"What do you mean?"

"My husband has written letters to the council for months, but they have done nothing. So I contacted the police and spoke to a very friendly Sergeant."

"About what?" Denis said, puzzled.

She smiled, saying, "Do come in Constable, and we will explain."

The ex-headmaster came out of his study to see who was speaking with his wife. DC Monkhouse introduced himself, and they sat down. As they drank tea out of delicate china cups, Alistair Bevis explained, "The disturbances started over a month ago. Nearly every night we heard noises coming from the nunnery."

"What sort of noises?" Denis asked, reaching for a ginger nut.

"Oh, things being moved around, scraping, dragging noises. That sort of stuff. Well, I rang the council, and they said it was church property. So I contacted the Catholic Diocese and was told the building had been empty for some ten years. The priest I spoke to suggested it might be homeless people seeking shelter for the night, but I don't think so."

"Why not?"

Beryl answered, "Tell him about the van driving in and out."

"What van," Denis asked, reaching for his notebook.

"Somebody drives in loads up stuff and drives out again,"

Denis took a deep breath, "Did you by any chance ..."

The ex-headmaster, interrupted, "Yes I recorded the number." He got up and came back with a piece of paper. On it, he had written, in an elegant hand, the number, colour and type of van with the times he had spotted the vehicle."

"He's an amateur astronomer and has a powerful telescope," Beryl explained.

Denis, thinking all his Christmas's had turned up at once, said, "Thank you very much. If only all people were as observant as you, it would make our job much easier."

Alistair said, "Only too pleased to help our police. Now I hope you can put an end to the disturbances."

“Oh, we will. Have no fear about that.”

Chapter 10

A quick check with the National Motor Registry revealed that the van was licensed to an Edmund Sunderland who lived at 25 Wilder Road. Denis phoned DI Dymond from his car. “Guv, I’m pretty sure I know who called in about the murders.”

“Really. Who?”

“His name is Edmund Sunderland.”

“Has he got any form?”

“Petty theft - lead from roofs. That sort of thing.”

“Do you think he’s the murderer?”

“Don’t know yet. But Oi’ve got his address. He’s got to be worth a pull, but Oi’d like some backup.”

“Why? Is he dangerous?”

“Don’t know Guv. But Sunderland might even be the murderer.”

“That’s pulling a bit of a long string, Denis.”

“Maybe, but Oi don’t fancy playing the hero if he acts up.”

“Okay, I’ll get him checked for previous offences and get back to you.”

Alan entered the forensics laboratory and looked around for Dr Elwood. The man always managed to look innocent. If it weren’t for the devilish pointy little beard, he would seem to be too good to be true. “Dr Elwood can Oi have a discreet word.”

Allard looked up from his computer. “Flashing a sweet smile, he said, “Inspector, how can I help you?”

Alan took him aside out of earshot of the other scientists. “Somebody’s been squealing to the press.”

“So?”

“It could be a member of your team?”

Allard looked at him square on. “It’s much more likely to be someone from your task force.”

“Yes, possibly, but I have to cover all bases.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“Gather your staff around and ask them, while I’m here.”

Dr Elwood said, “I would like everybody’s attention for a moment.”

All eyes turned in his direction. “It seems that somebody has given information about the nunnery murders to the press. Do any of you know anything about this?”

There was silence.

Allard turned to Alan. “Inspector, is that all?”

“Other than have you discovered anything else that can help us?”

“I will let you know if and when, Inspector.”

Alan felt very uneasy. This crap about leaking info to the paper was the last thing he needed. Now the detective had to talk to Jimbo. He phoned into the Ilfracombe nick to see if the check had been carried out on Sunderland. There was some previous for 'B and E' but nothing of a violent nature, except resisting arrest on one occasion while being interrupted stealing from a church. Alan phoned DC Monkhouse.

“Yes, Guv.”

“Sunderland has had some previous convictions for robbing religious buildings. Bring him in for questioning.”

“What about back up?”

“No one to spare. Besides Sunderland's never been violent.”

“Loike I said, he could be the murderer.”

“Just bring him in before the press conference.”

Denis checked out the van in the driveway of number 25. It matched Mr Bevis' details. As Denis approached the door, he heard a TV inside. Somewhere else in the house he heard loud music. He knocked on the door, and a dog started barking. A male voice yelled, “SHUT UP MAX!” Then, a woman, wearing track pants and an oversize sweater opened the door.

“Police. Is Edmund Sunderland home?”

She turned, yelling, “Ed, There's some pig here to see you.”

Charming, Denis thought.

An unshaven man wearing dirty jeans and a Black Sabbath T-shirt emerged, “What do you want?”

“Oi have reason to believe you made a phone call to us about finding three dead people in the nunnery.”

He shrugged. “Wasn't me?”

“We have evidence to the contrary, Mr Sunderland. So Oi want you to accompany me to the police station for further questioning.”

“Fuck you! Oi told you it wasn't me.”

“If you resist Oi will have to arrest you. And with your record, it won't look good.”

Edmund glared at him.

Denis spoke into his radio. “Backup required immediately, 25 Wilder Road, Ilfracombe.” He smiled at the thief. “Now let's go inside and wait for my colleagues to turn up. That's unless you want to tell me what you were doing at the nunnery late that night.”

As they sat in threadbare armchairs, Denis said, “At present, we're only interested in you as a witness. But that can soon change if you don't cooperate.”

“The place was abandoned. Nobody cared about the stuff there.”

“So you were there?”

Edmund lit up a cigarette. “Yeah, Oi was there.”

“In the disused nunnery?” “Yeah.”

“What did you see?”

“Three fucking bodies.”

“Where?”

“On the bleeding floor.”

“That would have given you quite a shock. So why did you phone us?”

“Doing my civic duty,” Edmund sneered.

Denis grinned, “Oi think there was more to it than that.”

“Oi don't give a flying fuck what you think. You can't prove nothing.”

Just then there was a loud knock, followed by “POLICE! OPEN THE DOOR.”

Max kicked up at the excitement.

DC Monkhouse stood. “Time to go, Edmund.”

“But you said...”

“You're still telling porkies, Mr Sunderland. Oh! And put out the fag. We don't allow smoking in police cars.”

“Fuck you!” Edmund mouthed, stubbing out his fag and grabbing his leather jacket.

Hamilton Cabinets, the sign said. Quinn O’Ryan entered the business premises. He crossed the yard, attracted by the noise of a buzz saw. There was a pick-up truck with the company name on the doors. A man in overalls was unloading some boxes. Quinn approached him, flashing his warrant card. “DS O’Ryan. I’m looking for a Lloyd Hunt. I believe he works here.”

The worker pointed to the large shed, “He's cutting timber.”

There were half a dozen employees in the shed, all wearing ear protectors to drown out the screeching band saw. It was deafening. Quinn, approaching the man using the bandsaw, got his attention by showing him his police ID and beckoned him away from the noise.”

As they stood outside, Quinn said, “Are you, Lloyd Hunt?”

The muscular man looked at the detective suspiciously. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because I think you might be able to help us with our enquiries.”

“About what?”

“I’ll ask the questions.”

Becoming agitated, Lloyd said, “Let's make this quick. Oi have a lot of work to do today.”

“It’ll be a lot quicker if you answer my questions. “You used to be in the Royal Marines, right?”

“Yes.

“Do you know a Corporal Mason Thomas.

“Yes. Is this about the sailor's murder?”

“Yes. we have reason to believe that the murderer wore a red military jacket when he carried out the deed.”

“Really? What's that got to do with me?”

“I don't know Mr Hunt. You tell me.”

“Fuck off! Oi know nothing about that.”

“Calm down. Nobody's accusing you of anything. Now you sometimes organise reunions at the George and Dragon pub.”

“Yes, but what's that got to with anything?”

“And you dress up as officers in red jackets.”

“There's no croime in that, is there?”

“Did Corporal Thomas attend?”

“Usually, yes.”

“Sergeant Hunt, we need to test those jackets.”

“You've got to be fucking joking mate.”

“I need a list of all those who have such a jacket and their contact details.”

“Jesus, you don't seriously think any of my mates had anything to do with it.”

“No, but we need those jackets for elimination purposes.”

Hunt thought about it. He didn't want any truck with the cops. “The best Oi can do see if the guys will bring their jackets to the pub.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” He handed the cabinet maker his card. “Phone me when you've got it organised. And make it soon. We want to catch the bastard who killed your mate.”

DI Dymond felt distinctly uncomfortable standing in front of the microphones. DCI Gallagher sat beside him, officially to offer her support but in reality to see that he didn't make matters worse. He cleared his throat. “Ladies and gentlemen of the media the police are currently investigating the deaths of the three local people found murdered in the Sacred Heart Nunnery.”

A seasoned journalist, pasty, rotund, asked, “Why did you hold back the fact that the three people died together?”

“Because we don't know if they did die together. We discovered the bodies at the same time in the same location, but it looks as though they were killed separately, elsewhere.”

Well fielded, Doreen thought.

A female reporter, with big hair and gypsy bangles that clinked together as she raised her hand, said.

“Do you have any idea who the murderer is yet?”

“We have somebody helping us with our enquiries.”

“WHO IS IT?” Some of the media people yelled out.

“We are not at liberty to divulge that at present. Next question.” Alan was getting into his stride.

A young man from the local television station rose up. "Why were the bodies placed in the nunnery?"

"We don't know that at present. Perhaps the killer thought it would take us longer to discover the bodies."

Following a few more questions, DCI Gallagher rose and took the microphone. "We will keep you informed of any further developments. Thank you all for attending."

"You did a good job. Maybe I'll leave press conferences to you in future," Doreen said, as they left the media centre.

"Oi don't think so," Alan laughed.

"DC Monkhouse and DS Copperwaite entering the room," Alisha said to the tape recorder.

Eddie Sunderland sat across the table, arms folded, gritting his teeth. "How much longer are you going to keep me in this fucking room?"

"Why? Is there somewhere important you have to be?" Denis said.

Alisha said, "It must have been quite a shock to see those bodies."

"It was."

"Unless you put them there. Then you wouldn't have been surprised," Alisha taunted.

Eddie glared at her "You're not gonna fit me up with that. Oi thought they were sleeping but why would they be sleeping on a cold stone floor?"

"Why were you there, Edmund?" DC Monkhouse asked. "With your form, you were probably up to no good. You must have quite a collection of religious stuff by now, and Oi want to see it."

"Okay, so I nicked a few trinkets from the place. It was all abandoned anyway. Nobody cared about the stuff."

Denis got close up to Sunderland. "You've been rumbled old son, so you might as well come clean. Did you see anybody else in the nunnery on the night you came across the victims?"

"No. Course not."

"What about any other night?" Denis pressed.

"There was this one time when Oi was disturbed."

"What do you mean, Eddie," DS Copperwaite asked.

"There was someone there, with a powerful flash light. So Oi hid."

"Did you see who it was?"

"No. Loike Oi said, he had a bright torch, near blinded me."

"What happened then?" Denis asked.

"He went away. Oi heard a car starting, so Oi went out to look, but he was driving away."

"Did you see what sort of car it was?"

"Yeah, it was one of them Jeeps,"

“What loike a Jeep Cherokee,” Denis prompted.

“No. It was loike one of the old ones with a canvas top,”

“What, an army Jeep?” Denis said,

“Yeah, one of them.”

Denis looked at Alisha. They had gone as far as they could with the suspect. She announced, “Interview ended at 8:16 pm.” She turned to Edmund. “You can go now. But we may need to speak to you again.”

He got up, “Can you give me a lift home. Can't get a bus this toime of noight.”

“Do you think we're running a fucking taxi service. Get lost before Oi charge you with theft,” Denis said.

After Eddie had scampered away, Alisha said, “Why would someone bring attention to themselves by driving a noisy car to look in the nunnery.”

“He might have been casing the joint.”

“You watch too many fucking yank detective b-movies, my lad.”

“You know what I mean, Sarg.”

“All we are aware is that Sunderland told us a story. He could have made it up to get us off his back.”

“He's not smart enough to work that out. Besides he didn't know anything about the military connection,” Denis stated.

“Oi grant you that, Denis but it's still pulling a long bow.”

“Come on Alisha. Some guy checks the place out. Then, just days later three bodies are left there. It's got to be worth following up.”

She chewed her lip, “Oi guess there can't be that many people driving Army Jeeps around here.”

“Moind you, it makes me wonder why Alistair Bevis didn't mention it.”

Chapter 11

Megan Dymond couldn't help but blame her husband. Him and his fucking ego. He couldn't keep his opinions to himself for just one night. She had kowtowed to Lowel, Bent and Hardy for many years and partnership opportunities came around with the frequency of Halley's Comet. She'd had forebodings when Clarence Hardy had summoned her to his office that afternoon. The words he had used were, ‘conflict of interest on the home front.’ Her Rival, Agatha Fielding, whose partner, a chartered accountant with a major firm in Exeter, who had advised the Hardys in financial matters, beamed as staff members congratulated her on her success. Megan couldn't handle facing Alan that night.

Alan arrived home and found the note. It read:

‘Have gone to stay with Judith for a few days.’ She added, ‘Didn't get Partnership!!!’

He felt frazzled after the news conference and found solace in a fine malt whisky. He stared at the note again. It wasn't like Megan to disappear without a bye or leave. After a second drink, he rang her sister's number. “Hi Judith, is Megan there?”

“Alan, she's distraught. Now isn't the right time.”

“Oi'd like to speak to her.”

“She's resting. Missing out on that partnership was a huge blow to her.”

“That's why Oi want to speak to her - give her my support.”

“Bit late for that, don't you think. Megan will ring you if and when she feels like it.”

“Fuck it!” he expounded to the empty house. He and Judith had never gotten on together. It wasn't a problem though as he didn't have to see her very often. Now she'd poisoned her sister against him; Alan needed someone in his corner. The only one he could think of was Alisha, and she had been cool towards him since the Navy camp visit. Women, Alan couldn't figure them. He phoned Quinn O'Ryan. “Can you pop round to my drum and bring me up to scratch on our case?”

“Can't it wait for the briefing tomorrow, Guv?”

“There something Oi need to run by you. And Oi've got half a bottle of JW here Oi need help with.”

“Oh, you silver-tongued devil, you.”

“Can you pick up a curry take out for me on the way over?”

Beau Durand saw the headlights flash three times in quick succession. Pulling a warm beanie down, flattening his ears, he left his car and walked to the one signalling him. Seeing Niall in the car, he slipped into the passenger seat.

“You said it was urgent, so what have you got for me?”

“Got for you! Oi'm lucky to still have a fucking job owing to you and your dodgy info.”

Niall swung round to face him in the dim light of the car interior. “What the fuck are you on about, Beau? I told you the murders were connected. I said we found the bodies altogether.”

“Yes, but you omitted to say the murderer didn't kill them in the Nunnery?”

“You didn't ask.”

“Oi was made to feel a right prick after the press conference.”

“Don't you try laying the blame on me.”

“You've got to make it roight.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who's the suspect you lot have been interrogating?”

“You don't seriously think ...”

“The way I see it is that Doreen Gallagher could find our little meetings absorbing.”

Niall stared at the reporter. “You fucking threaten me, and you might find it unsafe to walk the Ilfracombe streets.”

“So now you're threatening me. Well, I've just been recording our conversation and ...”

Niall grabbed Beau around the throat. “Give me your phone.”

The reporter, choking, handed it over.

“You recording it on this?”

“Yes.”

“Delete it.”

Shaking, Beau did just that. Recovered, he said, “As Oi was trying to say before you tried throttling me is that Oi'd already uploaded the recording to my private cloud account. So you'd better give me the witness.”

“Fuck you!” the informant snapped. “Some layabout called Edmund Sunderland.”

DS Copperwaite looked at the report from the DMV. There were only five old Army Jeeps registered around the Ilfracombe area. She figured it wouldn't take long to locate them, but she felt it was a waste of time. There could be any number of unregistered Jeeps for use on farms and the like. She didn't think Alan would go for it and decided to visit Mrs Thomas instead.

It was almost dark by the time she reached the farm. Mr Thomas, just back from the evening milking, removed his Wellington boots, using the edge of the concrete steps, leading to his front door. Seeing somebody with a flash light heading in his direction, shielding his eyes, he said, “Who are you?”

“DS Copperwaite.”

“Don't you people have homes to go to.”

“Sorry to disturb your evening but did your son have an officer's red dress jacket?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“It could help us in our investigation, Mr Thomas.”

He paused, then said, “Woife moight know. You'd best come inside and tell us what it's about.”

While Mrs Thomas looked among her son's clothes, the farmer listened while Alisha explained, “We believe the killer wore a red military jacket. We're checking your son's Navy friends, who wore them at mock reunions.”

“Are you saying that the killer could have worn Mason's jacket.”

She smiled, “It's more to do with eliminating those that don't match the forensic evidence.”

Just then Mrs Thomas emerged a red dress jacket in her hands. “Is this what you're looking for

“Yes, thank you very much.”

“What's going to happen to it?”

“We need to carry out tests on its woollen fibre. Oi will let you have it back afterwards if you loike.”

“That would be noice,” Mrs Thomas said.

Mr Thomas showed Alisha out. Standing in the light of the porch, he said, “She'll be upset now. Next toime you want to see us phone first and speak to me.”

Megan loved Judith who, always the wiser sister offered good advice -- sometimes too much of it. But she needed her support and Judith willingly gave it. Judith's registrar husband, Matthew added

in his two pennies worth about how to make relationships work. Megan envied Judith for that. Megan had just begun to relax when, in the middle of dinner, around 7 pm, the phone rang. Matthew took the call. It was Alan.

“Hi, Alan. Haven't heard from you for a while.”

Alan, not feeling like pleasantries, said, “Is my woife there?”

“Yes. But this probably isn't ...”

“Put her on, Matthew.”

The next voice he heard was Megan's. “Yes, Alan.”

Not the greeting he wanted to hear, officious and business-like.” Oi'm sorry to hear about you not getting the partnership.”

“Don't you dare go there. I don't want your sympathy, but I did want your support.”

“Oi have always supported you, Megan.”

“Until your prejudice and ego got in the way.”

“You mean that dinner party! We laughed about it afterwards.”

“Until it wrecked my career. I may have to look for another firm now.”

Alan couldn't help himself. “Maybe it's not such a bad thing to get away from those small-minded pricks.”

“Damn you, Alan. This problem is about us, not them. I don't want you to phone me here. I'll contact you when I'm ready to discuss the next step.”

“The next step!” He blurted to the dead phone. His next step was to reach for the JW, but the bottle was as empty as his life. He had to keep focused. He rang Alisha.

“Alan, what do you want?”

“Toime to bring in the suspects. Start with that worm, Sunderland.”

“He's just a toime waster. Unless you want him charged with stealing religious trinkets.”

“The little prick lied about that Jeep.”

“We don't know that for sure.”

“And bring in that Toby Bennett. It's time to rattle a few cages.”

Detecting underlying anger in his voice, she ventured, “Are you okay, Guv?”

“Why?”

“It's just that you sound a bit choked about something.”

He paused, took a deep breath, said, “Oi think Megan has left me.”

“Shit! No! Why?”

“She lost out on the partnership and blamed me for it.”

“You sound loike you need a friend.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to share a two-day-old pasta and stale red wine?”

“Are you sure?”

“Oi could change my mind very easily, Guv, so say yes quickly.”

Chapter 12

The next day Alan entered the incident room, with more spring in his step. “Okay, boys and girls tell me something encouraging.”

Alisha repeated some pillow talk. “Oi went round to the Thomas' and picked up their son's red jacket. Forensics has it now.”

Niall piped up. “I've collected the Marine jackets they wear for their reunions. They're with the scientists as well.”

DC Dymond commented, “Oi know all this is tedious, but it's the best lead we have. If we can match the coat with the foibre sample and if the killer wore that jacket while committing the crime there could be other trace evidence to help us. Meanwhile, it's toime give our prospects a tug. Get them in. Question them. If they lie to us, provide them with some cell toime. We have to get a break in this case.”

Denis spoke up. “Do you want me to bring the headmaster in?”

“Why? Do you suspect he's telling porkies?”

“No Guv. it's just that we could ask Mr Bevis about Sunderland's Jeep.”

“Good idea, DC Monkhouse. But do it straight away, before we bring Sunderland in.” Then Alan asked, “Any other riveting news to help solve this bloody case?”

Quinn spoke up. “Lloyd Hunt has cooperated so far, without too many questions. I'm a bit suspicious of him, though.”

“Why?”

“He seems a bit too obliging, Guv.”

Alan said, “He was an NCO in the RM, used to following orders, not questioning them. Leave him for now. But you could bring in Enya Woodruff for questioning. See what else she knows. Oi want to be in on that one.” Then he added. “Alroight, chop, chop. Get out there and bring back results.”

As they drank tea out of delicate china cups, smartly dressed, pipe smoking Alistair Bevis said, “What happens when the nunnery is no longer a crime scene, Denis. Will that ghastly person be back again?”

DC Monkhouse flashed his 'trust me' smile. “Tell me something. While looking through your telescope have you ever seen an army Jeep parked near the nunnery?”

Carefully considering the question, the ex-headmaster said, “Can't say I have. No, only the van.”

“You're certain?”

“Denis, I neither saw it or heard it.”

DC Monkhouse put his cup in its saucer. He smiled, “Well that clears that up. Oi can show myself out.”

Alistair followed him. "Did the van driver mention the Jeep?"

Denis turned to him. "Now we know he was lying."

Alan looked across the table at Edmund Sunderland. The young man put him in mind of Hollywood bad boy, Sean Penn. "We know you've been nicking stuff from the nunnery. Is that what you were doing the noight you say you saw the Jeep?"

"Oi was just looking around."

"What, late at noight? We already know you lied about the Jeep, So what else are you holding back?"

"Oi didn't lie about the fucking Jeep."

Alan leant into Edmund's face. "Bull shit! We know there wasn't any Jeep."

"Well, Oi saw it. It was one of them camouflaged jobs."

DS Copperwaite, assisting in the interview, said, "Then how come our witness stated that only your van was there."

Edmund threw his hands up. "Maybe they're fucking bloind. Oi don't know."

Alan looked at Alisha, then at Edmund. "Interview stopped at 10:15 am." He turned to the constable by the door. "Show Mr Sunderland our accommodation to give him time to reflect on his lies."

Edmund, up on his civil rights, said, "You can't do that unless you charge me."

"If that's how you want it. Edmund Sunderland Oi'm arresting you for breaking into private premises." After reading his rights to him, Alan watched as the prisoner got led away.

"Why is he so insistent about such a minor thing?" Alisha asked as they went back to Alan's office.

"Yeah, Oi was wondering the same thing. It doesn't make any sense."

"Unless he did see a Jeep there."

"But our Mr Bevis is adamant there wasn't."

"Perhaps we'd better get him in."

"No, Alisha. Oi, think it's a red herring, distracting us from the real business in hand."

"But what if the killer did use a Jeep?"

Alan sighed, "Unlikely. Why use an uncomfortable, noisy vehicle? It makes no sense."

"There's not a lot about this case that does."

Alan Dymond had had some tricky cases to solve but none like this one. As far as he could see, there was nothing substantial to link the three murders. Every time the detective got a lead it quickly became a dead end. He still didn't know where the murders took place or even if all the murderer had killed the victims at the same location. He did know they had died at different times, all with bullets from the same gun. Feeling particularly despondent he rang Lowel, Bent and Hardy, asking for Megan. She wasn't in. He got another idea, not one of his best. "Put me through to Clarence Hardy."

"He is rather busy. Would you like to leave a message?"

“Yes, you can tell him Oi pay a great deal to this firm. Oi would have thought he would at least give me foive minutes of his 'valuable' toime.”

Assuming the pushy man to be a major client, she backtracked. “Please hold, Oi'm putting you through now.”

He smiled, having just scored his first victory in some time, albeit against some PA trying to protect her boss from the big bad world.

“Yes, who's calling?”

“Alan, er Detective Inspector Dymond.”

“Yes, well as much as I would enjoy one of our debates I'm...”

“Oi know. Very busy. Well, this won't take long. Oi know that we don't get on, but that's no reason to stop my woife getting her well-deserved partnership.”

“That was a joint decision taken by all the partners.”

“She was as good as told she'd got it. That was before the dinner at our place. You're going to say me ...”

“I'll tell you this. I've wasted enough of my valuable time with you, Inspector. So goodbye.”

“FUCK YOU!” he yelled into the dead phone. Feeling even worse for the humiliating experience. Alan, lost in the ocean of his mind, was about to fire a 'help me' flare when his phone rang. It was Alisha. She wanted to run something by him and invited him over for dinner. He started having erotic fantasies about him and Alisha. No. Best not to go there.

Alisha's impulsiveness mixed with a Florence Nightingale complex, with a bit of mad hatter thrown in for good measure, tended to be self-destructive in pushing away the things she most desired. It wasn't that she desired Alan Dymond. He was a bit too, old, chauvinistic and aggravating for her taste. He also happened to be her boss; he was married, and he was vulnerable. But now she had glimpsed his vulnerability she was ready with the emotional band-aid. In her mind, he had become another cause, someone who needed fixing. This odd relationship became a weird sort of turn on for her. But it could be interesting, she thought, slipping into her sexiest dress.

Denis thought the petty thief was telling the truth. If not why was Eddie Sunderland still sticking to his story about the Jeep? After half a day in gaol, he still insisted the Jeep had been there. Edmund was one of those non-aggressive cat burglars who couldn't help themselves. Or, more to the point, did help themselves. Breaking into empty premises gave them the only adrenalin buzz their life provided. Denis grabbed Niall as they finished up for the day. “We can't leave him in there over noight.”

“Why not? It'll give the weak prick more time to change his story.”

“But what if his story is roight?”

“Why would your bloke say there wasn't a Jeep there if there was?”

“Why would Sunderland insist there was if there wasn't?”

Niall, walking to the door said, “Let the boss sort it out in the morning.”

“Niall, this is the first piece of conflicting evidence. Oi think we should get Alistair Bevis in for questioning.”

“What tonight?”

“It could wait till morning. But Oi want to interview Sunderland before we leave.”

“Den, it's the Guv's decision, not ours.”

“Oi should be running the interview.”

“So you want to do it behind his back.”

“Oi want to be able to report some progress when he gets in tomorrow.”

Niall smirked, “And you reckon questioning that little weasel again is going to do it?”

“We'll never know if we don't try.” Denis grinned, “Oi'll buy you a drink afterwards.”

Edmund Sunderland (he didn't like Eddie, which made him like some lowlife American gangster) was beginning to wonder if he'd mistaken the Jeep for something else. It would be best to say he'd made a mistake to get out of the pig pen. Edmund sat in his cell philosophically contemplating his current dilemma. He put it down to being a 'test-tube' baby. A fucking science experiment, Benj, his closest mate called it. Some bright spark referred to the test tube as a 'womb with a view'. Edmund blamed his dad for his life of crime because, as it turned out, his father wasn't averse to a bit of 'B and E' as a lad, growing up in Liverpool.

Just then his door was opened, and the custody officer stood there.

Edmund looked up at him. “Can't a bloke get some rest around here?”

“Never moind that. You're coming with me.”

“What is it now?”

“You'll foind out,”

Denis and Niall led the prisoner to the interrogation room, where they left him alone, wondering what was going on.

Niall and Denis entered. As Denis took a seat opposite Edmund, he asked, “Okay, so what else can you tell me about this Jeep?”

Edmund leant forward in his seat. “So you pigs believe me now?”

Denis scowled, “We're giving you chance to convince us you're telling the truth.”

“If you believe me why the fuck am Oi still here?”

“Oi have to convince my boss. So help yourself and give us something specific to go on.”

Niall, bored and tired, said, “This is a waste of fucking time. He never saw anyone at the nunnery and can't even give a decent description of the Jeep.”

“There was one thing,” Edmund stated, “It had one of those spare wheel covers on it.”

“And?” Niall pressed.

“It had some badge on with Latin words.”

“Would you recognise it if you saw it again?” Denis asked.

“Maybe. But it was dark.”

“So how did you know what it was?” Niall asked.

“I shone my flash loight on it.”

“Wait here,” Denis said, leaving the room. He came back with a laptop computer, displaying a Royal Marine badge. “Could this be the symbol you saw?”

“Could be. I recognise the lion on the crown.”

“You sure about that?” Niall pressed.

“Yeah. That's it.”

The two detectives conferred outside the interview room. “We should let him go,” Denis said. “He's the only decent witness we've got.”

Niall looked at his colleague. “He didn't know about the Royal Marine connection, which makes his version of events more plausible.”

“Do you want to run it by the boss first?”

“No. Let's just get Sunderland released and get on with looking for that Jeep.”

“So what is it you want to tell me about?” Alan asked, trying to raise his eyes from Alisha's generous cleavage.

“Would you like some more pasta?” she smiled, reaching for the bolognese sauce.”

“No, Oi'm full. Wouldn't mind another drop of red, though.”

Topping up his glass, Alisha, noticing his leering looks, said, “We could relax in the lounge.”

“Oi hope you didn't get me here under false pretences, Sergeant” he grinned.

“Is that a chargeable offence, officer?” she said, batting her eyelashes at him.”

Enjoying his uneasiness, she added, “If so, Oi have some handcuffs in the bedroom.”

He felt his jaw almost hit the floor. Alisha's cheeky behaviour went beyond flirting. The subtext was a clear invitation that more than pasta and wine could be on the menu. The good angel told him it would also be a terrible mistake. The one with the pointy tail whispered, “Go for it. You know you want to.” He had to change the subject.

“And there's me thinking you were going to tell me about a new idea to help with the case.”

“Oi have had one or two thoughts.”

“Oi'm all ears.”

“Well, what if the victims didn't know each other, but each had some connection with the killer.”

On the more comfortable ground, Alan, somewhat relieved, said, “Oi've thought about that, but it still doesn't get us any closer.”

“Taking the theory a step further, what sort of person would have been in a situation to mix with a young soldier, an old tailor and an elderly lesbian?”

“Could be anybody.”

“Yes but this person can get close to them. So it would have to be somebody they trusted - a priest or doctor, maybe?”

“Or it could be somebody who had a reason to kill them. Maybe the killer was after an unpaid debt.”

Alisha slumped back in her seat. “Jesus, we're clutching at straws.”

Alan said, “We need to find out more about this Flavia Morgan. Bring Enya Woodruff in tomorrow for questioning and see where that leads us.”

Feeling her chance slipping away, Alisha made her move. “How about sitting somewhere more comfortable,” she said in a husky Monroe voice.

Alan got up. They stood close to each other, He said, “Alisha, you're a very sexy woman and I'm very tempted, but we'd regret it in the morning.”

“Fuck the morning, Alan. Let's grasp the moment.”

He moved back, taking the hardest step of his life. “I'd better go. Thanks for the meal and the company.”

What about me she thought, sexually turned on and annoyed at the same time. Catching up with Alan at the front door, she said, “You only have a right to leer at my body if you've the guts to do something about it.”

He stared at her, then grabbed her to him fiercely. “Fuck it! Let's go to bed.”