

THE FACELESS MURDERER

THE SECRET BEHIND AN IMPOSSIBLE MURDER

From the pen of
KASHIKA SALWAN



BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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BlueRose ONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

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ISBN: 978-81-6744-743-2

Cover Design: Aafiya Saifi
Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: October 2026

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PROLOGUE

Jack, after a hard day's work, came home at 11:30 pm. He was dead tired.

He opened the door to his modest two bedroom living place where he lived in Central London. His Tomcat, who was resting on the windowsill jumped down and came to greet him.

"Aha! You are hungry. Understood" He went to the kitchen and pulled out the packet of milk and cat food and laid it in the food bowl for his cat to start eating.

When the cat was busy eating, Jack freshened up and ate his canned chicken and rice, which he brought from the superstore at the corner of his street, while watching his favorite detective show, Castle in the drawing room.

During this, what he did not realize was that the knife in his fruit basket, lifted, as if by an invisible hand.

The knife, then changed direction and launched towards Jack like an arrow and embedded itself into Jack's chest.

Jack, shocked beyond his wits at the sudden and unexpected attack, looked down wide eyed at the knife protruding from his chest and the river of blood flowing out from the wound.

Slowly he started losing consciousness and slumped to the floor.

"Max" was the last word he could utter before he was finally put out of his misery.

CHAPTER 1

Detective Richard Connelly left his home exactly at 9 A.M, following the routine that he had lived by for the past 10 years of his life, while working for MI6.

He reached the Agency's London Headquarters at exactly 9:15, where he was met by his assistant Mark.

Mark had joined MI6 one year before and by now was well versed with Richard's daily routine. He was ready for Richard with one take away decaf from Costa Coffee and one cinnamon bun.

Mark Grey, was a graduate in Criminology from Cambridge University. He had lived with his parents in the small town of Lincolnshire his entire life. Many people would not have heard of the place but Mark loved it. Peaceful and quiet, the town had it's own special place in the hearts of it's residents.

Mark came to London to pursue his dream of making it big in a big city. Having excelled in his high school, he wanted to make a mark. He pursued criminology because of his passion for justice and understanding how the criminal justice system works.

After graduation, he was looking to work at a big firm, when he attended Richard Connelly's lecture at the Louth Townhall. He knew then and there that he wanted to join this man and work under him.

After the lecture he went up to Richard to ask for a job. Richard, impressed that someone had the ability to come up to him, gave him the job immediately. And now here he was, Mark Grey, a part of all of Richard's adventures.

"Good morning, Mark. Punctual as always!" Greeted Richard

"Good morning, Richard. There is someone waiting to see you in Room 5".

Richard, with his coffee and bun in hand, went up to the waiting room, where he was surprised to see Ashton, the Mayor from the city waiting for him.

"Good morning, Richard. I will skip the pleasantries and come straight to the point. I have been wanting to see you regarding something that is very urgent. My son Jack, well, I treated him like my son, was murdered last night. The cause was a stab wound to the chest.

I need you to find the culprits as soon as possible Richard"

"Calm down Ashton. I will find the killer. I need to visit Jack's place to look for clues. Did you or anyone else visit the place or touch anything?"

"No nobody did. I came straight to you as soon as we discovered the body and all the servants have been instructed to not touch anything"

"Great" He turned to Mark and said "Let's go. Looks like we have an urgent case on our hands".

CHAPTER 2

At Jack's place, Richard noticed a small but clean apartment. All the items were where they should have been in an organized house. The place was comfortable in it's own way but was well lit.

Jack's body was lying face down in a pool of blood. Ashton's instruction about the servants not touching anything had been followed to the letter.

Taking out a pair of disposable gloves from his pocket (which was the one thing without which Richard never left his house), Richard bent down near the body and turned it so that Jack faced upwards.

The wound in his chest was now a gaping hole with the knife embedded in it.

Richard pulled out the knife with his gloved hand and saw that it was a chef's knife with a wide hilt and a sharp blade. He realized the weapon was specifically selected for the purpose of murder.

He handed the knife to Mark, who placed it in a transparent Ziplock bag labeled 'Evidence'.

He looked around the room and it's precision clearly stated that nothing else had been tampered with and so he would find no other evidence.

As a safety measure, however, he went around the house. He gathered that Jack was middle class man, who lived a

simple life. In the bedroom he found a cat, who, he gathered, most likely belonged to Jack.

The cat was preening itself and looked up indifferently when Richard entered the room.

After his tour of Jack's place ended, he met Mark and Ashton, who were waiting for him by the door. Ashton was clearly eager to leave the stench of the body and death that permeated the house.

"So, were you able to find anything?" enquired Ashton when they were sitting in the car.

"I have some theories of my own which I will confirm only once we get the murder weapon back from forensic examination."

Ashton nodded silently and looked out the car window broodingly.

CHAPTER 3

The next day, when Richard reached his office, Mark was already at the door. But other than the usual coffee and bun, there was a sealed envelope in his hand.

“Your resignation Mark? Tired of me already?” chided Richard

“Of course not. I am definitely not losing a well-paying job because of you. The forensic reports from the Jack murder case came along this morning. Just thought you would want to see them first thing” Replied Mark.

Richard nodded smiling and tore open the sealed envelope. He really wanted to solve this as soon as possible. He knew Ashton will not keep quiet and continue to bug him till the murderer is discovered.

His expression soon turned into one of confusion when he looked at the report.

“What is it Richard? You look pale?” asked Mark, concerned.

“Nothing...it’s nothing. Well if you leave out the fact that no fingerprints have been found on the murder weapon.”

“How is this possible? A murderer would have to touch the murder weapon, right? And even if he didn’t, we would have found gloves or tissues or something which he could have used to clean the weapon or hide his prints?” said Mark.

“Exactly Mark. This is what is puzzling me. We need to visit Jack’s place again. This murder is about to more sinister than we previously imagined. Let’s go”

CHAPTER 4

Ashton was sitting comfortably in his office at Shaftesbury Avenue in Central London, brooding about the latest turn of events.

He was remembering Michael and Susan Ridge, Jack's parents, whom he considered his closest friends in the world. How he would hang out at Michael's place during their college days at Oxford University.

And how he was there when Michael and Susan decided to get married in a sudden late night ceremony in Vegas and he has to book the last ticket on a British Airways flight to be there.

He remembered how nervous Michael was when he found out Susan was pregnant and how well he cared for her during those days.

He also remembered being at the hospital when Jack was born and how without any prior intimation, Michael had just announced (without asking Ashton at all) that Ashton would be the Godfather.

Despite all these happy memories, the one that was the heaviest and which stuck with him, was the day he lost his best friend. He remembered getting a call at 3 in the morning that the flight which were carrying his best friends to a special trip to Bali had crashed.

Since, he was the only living acquaintance of the couple, he completed the formalities with the authorities. It was that

day he realized, that in this day and age of social media and artificial intelligence, one still could not bring a person back from the dead. There were no survivors.

He was shocked, however pleasantly, to discover that their 2-month-old son was at home with his nanny as he was too young to fly.

Ashton then, spent all his time and energy(as much as he could devote from his hectic schedule in political life) to raising Jack as well as he could. He taught Jack how to swim, play baseball and interact with people.

He believed, and rightly so, that he was responsible for Jack's social, mental and emotional wellbeing. He promised himself that he would not let Michael and Susan down. He would be a hands-on father to Jack.

He did not marry for the rest of his life and had no children of his own. He wanted to be there for Jack and did not want to divert his attention away from him.

Sitting in his office today, Ashton realized that despite all his efforts, he had let Michael down. He could not save his son from the attack which claimed his life. However, he promised to himself that he would get justice for Jack, even if it cost every penny that he owned and the rest of the years of his life.

He would get the toughest punishment under UK law for the perpetrator of this heinous crime.

CHAPTER 5

While Ashton was brooding in his office, Richard went back to Jack's apartment to look for clues. He went through all of Jack's stuff and still could not find anything.

"I don't understand Mark. This is the second time we are here and have still found nothing. How is it possible. Every murderer leaves a cue" rued Richard.

"Maybe we are missing something critical Richard. Something which will form the basis of our investigation further." Suggested Richard.

"Yes Mark!" exclaimed Richard. "You are a genius. We need to go to the Forensic Department ourselves. I need to have a word with Ron, the head examiner there."

They left Jack's place as it is. In the heavy London midday traffic, it took then a little less than hour to reach the Forensic Department headquarters located on Oxford Street.

"Richard! I have been waiting for you since I received your text. What's up? I had to cancel my plans with Kate to stay here and wait for you," said Ron

"Sorry to keep you waiting Ron. You know I never would have interrupted your plans had it not been absolutely urgent" replied Richard.

Ron was surprised as Richard never apologized about cancelling his plans with his wife, not to mention he had done

it on many occasions in the past decade since they had been friends.

He nodded. "Yes, I know. Shoot"

"Regarding the murder of Jack Ridge, whose autopsy you conducted today. Did you notice anything suspicious about the murder weapon or the manner in which he was killed?" asked Richard.

"Yes, I remember Jack. Some relative of the mayor, if I am not wrong. The case appeared to be pretty straightforward in my view. Cause of death was the knife, driven straight into the heart." Said Ron.

"And what about the prints on the knife? Found any?" asked Richard impatiently. He worried he had asked Ron to stay back without any valid reason.

"Ah yes. Now that you say this I remember. I found it really hard to miss that there were no finger prints on the knife for me to analyze. I had asked my assistant to stay back and help me with the fingerprints. We were really puzzled. I was going to raise it with you in the afternoon but got caught up with another case." Replied Ron.

"Thank you, Ron. You have been a lifesaver. Just one more question before I let you go. On the knife, did it look like it had been wiped to remove fingerprints or any other action which can suggest clearly that a weapon has been handled?" questioned Richard.

"Well, I am not 100% sure but am reasonably certain that the weapon has not been handled for at least a fortnight. I have been in this profession for the past 10 years Richard, doing forensic examinations all my life and I am able to read weapons like a person reading a children's book.

And I am pretty certain that this weapon has not been lifted for about 14-16 days." Remarked Ron.

"Thank you so much Ron. Will catch up with you later" said Richard and left with Mark.

"We have a rather peculiar case at our hands Mark. And my worst fears just came true." Richard mused.

CHAPTER 6

Mark could not understand exactly what Richard concluded from the conversation but knew better than to question him on the matter. If Richard was onto something it would definitely turn out to be something.

So he followed Richard quietly out of Ron's office awaiting instructions.

"Mark. I ought to tell you the truth this is something most peculiar and unexpected. How are we supposed to catch someone who does not have a physical form or figure." Mused Richard.

"No form or figure? What exactly do you mean Richard? A murderer would have to be a normal person like us, well not exactly law abiding like us but you get what I mean." Mark replied, looking at Richard as if years of years of MI6 duty had finally taken a toll on one of it's finest detectives.

"No Mark I am not suddenly demented, nor have I lost my mind." Richard said, sensing Mark's reluctance. "Did you hear and even remotely understand what Ron said. The weapon was not touched and there were no wipe marks to suggest that it had been touched recently."

"So what do you mean Richard?" questioned Mark

"What I mean Mark is this. For the first time in the history of UK, we will catch a faceless murderer- one who is invisible," said Richard.

CHAPTER 7

Richard went home to his apartment that night perplexed. He wanted to have a nice quiet evening with his daughter, eating spaghetti tossed in olive oil with extra oregano that his daughter liked and some wine gifted by his neighbors when they had shifted next door two weeks ago.

However, despite all these plans, his mind kept wandering back to the case that, for the first time in his life, felt very tough to solve.

Richard loved his daughter his daughter immensely. She meant the world to him. Well for their fathers, daughters always remain their princesses but for Richard, Masha was his friend, his confidant, and his advisor.

After his wife died, Masha was all that he had in his life which even remotely signified love. He could not even dream of finding love again. Being the old- fashioned kind, he believed you only love once and for him it was his wife and Masha's mother, Sarah.

Sarah was the most beautiful woman Richard had ever seen. He had first met her on a cruise trip in Vegas. He was on a break with his friends to party hard, right after completing his training for MI6. Sarah was trying to find a charger for her phone. Being so drunk, she did not realize it was in her pocket.

It was that moment that made Richard realize she was the one for him and that he would marry her.

They got married in an intimate ceremony at his father's bungalow in England and Masha was born the next year.

His daughter, Masha, now a grown woman of 25, was tall and regal, just like her mother, befitting the general Manager of the Scottish National Bank, headquartered in Edinburgh. She flew down occasionally to check on her father and dine with him.

Masha knew her father was alone after the death of her mother, when the plane in which she was travelling from Birmingham to London crashed. There were no survivors from the 200 passengers travelling aboard the plane.

But Masha knew, there were 201 fatalities that day since her father also never recovered from the loss of his wife, whom he loved dearly.

He never showed this side of him to anybody, not even his closest friends, other than occasionally commenting about the uncertainty of life to Masha.

Masha had suggested to her father to try finding someone suitable for him to be married again but he had always steadfastly refused and changed the topic of conversation entirely.

That day, in particular, Masha noticed that there was something troubling her father. She said "Is everything ok Dad? You look worried?"

"Yes dear, everything is wonderful. Just this new case that I have been working on has me perplexed and left me in doubt whether I will be able to solve it or not." Replied Richard.

"Come on Dad you are the best detective MI6 has had in years. I am absolutely certain you will find a way out of this

puzzle of a case really soon and I know you will never disappoint me or MI6” encouraged Masha.

Richard nodded and smiled at his daughter.

He, now had a renewed purpose and determination in finding the killer in this case.

CHAPTER 8

Richard asked Mark to prepare a list of all of Jack's contacts and was surprised to discover that Jack was a relatively private person whose contacts included the Mayor Ashton, two friends Bob and Abby and one of his cousins who lived in Washington DC, Arthur.

Richard decided to eliminate America first and then move to the local contacts.

He had to admit Mark was perfect in his preparation of the list as it included a list of their last known addresses, mails and contact numbers.

He dialed Arthur's number. After almost 5-6 rings, by when Richard had given up hope of connecting with him, Arthur picked up.

"Hello?" said Arthur, in a tone clearly suggesting agitation. "I do not require any loan please".

Clearly a person frustrated with agents advertising loans for different banks.

"Hello Mr Arthur. Sorry to disappoint but I am not calling on behalf of any bank. I am Detective Richard Connelly from MI6." replied Richard.

"Oh apologies Detective Connelly. Had a rough morning. Please tell me what can I do for you?" Arthur said.

"Mr. Arthur. Do you have a cousin named Jack, who lived in London?" Richard began the enquiry.

"Yes I do Mr. Richard. He is the son of my mother's sister. But one minute. Why did you say 'lived'. Has he gone somewhere? Has he turned rogue?" began Arthur, sounding genuinely worried.

"It is with a heavy heart, Arthur that I have to inform you he was murdered two days back due to a stab wound in the chest. I am sorry for your loss." Richard hated being the bearer of bad news.

The day he retired from MI6, this would be the one job he would never miss doing.

He knew Arthur was shocked when there was no response from the other end and that Arthur was emotional because he could hear sniffing sounds over the phone.

But when, a few moments later, Arthur came back on the phone, his voice was calm and composed.

"Thank you for letting me know Mr. Richard. I will be flying down to London tomorrow morning itself to complete the formalities." Came the reply.

"No problem, Arthur. Also, I am the investigating officer in this case, so naturally, I have some doubts. I need you to meet me as soon as possible" said Richard.

"Sure, I will land in the morning so I can meet you at noon. Text me the place and I will be there. Gotta go I have a flight to catch now. Talk to you tomorrow Richard bye" hurried Arthur.

"Bye Arthur see you tomorrow" came Richard's reply.

"Hope he has some answers tomorrow. Otherwise God alone is the witness to this murder" mused Richard.

CHAPTER 9

Richard was waiting for Arthur the next day, sharp at noon, at a small cozy plaza in Central London.

At exactly 2 minutes past noon, he saw a man enter the plaza, wearing a fedora hat and a black coat. Had Richard not seen Arthur's photo from Mark's file, he would have thought of him as a dacoit himself.

He waved Arthur over to his table and waited while he removed his hat and coat and sat down opposite him.

"How was your flight?" asked Richard, trying to make conversation and gauging Arthur's mood and reaction.

"It was good. Might have enjoyed it had I not been pre occupied with all the formalities I have to complete now being Jack's only living blood relation" replied Arthur.

"Only blood relation is true but have you met Mayor Ashton? He is Jack's godfather right?" asked Richard.

"Well yes he is Jack's godfather but Jack was never very close to him. He felt Ashton was always on his back telling him what to do and he got really irritated some days" Arthur responded.

Richard nodded comprehendingly.

"So now onto business Arthur. Let us first get all the cliched questions out of the way, shall we? Do you know of anyone who might have a grudge against Jack or any deal gone wrong or anything? Enquired Richard.

“Not that I know of. We have been a bit out of touch recently but whenever he had a problem, he came straight to me. He would have mentioned if there was anything bothering him” came the reply.

“Sure, I get it. Now, anything of significance or anything you remember about Jack that was troubling him?” asked Richard.

“Nothing at all. He was a happy man, Richard. In most situations, he was the one telling me to remain calm and positive. He was really philosophical in these matters. Felt life should be lived to the fullest” replied Arthur.

By now Richard was becoming Impatient as he was not used to lack of progress in a case. He was about to leave when Arthur exclaimed suddenly

“Well now! How could I forget? He was supposed to meet a scientist on Thursday. He was really excited about meeting this Swedish scientist, who is here in UK for an International Science Conference. I, however, do not know, whether that meeting took place or not and what was it about. “

“This is great Arthur. Do you remember the name of that scientist? I figure I will have to catch up with him if my investigation is to progress.” Richard finally sighed as he had some leads now.

“Yes, I know the name. It was Karl Svensson. He was supposed to land in London on Wednesday and the conference was supposed to start on Friday. So Jack decided that he had one day, Thursday, when he can meet the scientist” said Arthur.

“Thanks a lot for your help Arthur. This is a big lead. I shall keep you in the loop if I find anything significant. Also, lunch is on me” he chided.

CHAPTER 10

“Ok so who is this Karl Svensson, Mark? Let’s hear it” As soon as Richard had finished his meeting with Arthur, he had contacted Mark and asked him to find out everything there is to find about the scientist.

“Well, he is in London for the conference and there was supposed to be a science conference in London last week. But there is one curious thing about him. His research focusses on the study of invisibility. That is, how can humans make themselves invisible and that too, scientifically” reported Mark.

“Alright. Even though I find it personally impossible to believe that it is possible but who are we to say anything. This is a day and age of invention and innovation” remarked Richard.

“True that. Also, I have already arranged a meeting with him at 2 o clock tomorrow afternoon at the Manor Hotel”. Richard was always impressed with Mark’s perfect mannerisms.

“Great, thanks Mark” replied Richard.

Now he was waiting for the professor to respond to certain important questions. Only he can unravel the mystery of this case now.

That night was a particularly difficult one for Richard if you considered the slow manner in which he felt time was passing. Hours felt like days which became impossible to pass.

Richard, being jumpy throughout the night, utilized his time researching about Karl Svensson and making plans about how to go about the interview with this curious scientist.

CHAPTER 11

The next day, Richard was at the Manor at 1. He felt it is better to be early at the venue to look around and be aware of his surroundings.

He gathered that the Manor hotel, being one of the tallest and elitist hotels in London, was 210 stories in height. It had three lifts and three exits, including one staff exit and one emergency exit.

He felt it was good to know the exits and entrances incase he wanted to leave early.

He went and sat in the dining area to wait. He recognized the famed scientist as he entered the dining area, from the pictures Mark had compiled in his report.

He beckoned him by a wave of his hand. Karl saw him wave and came and sat down opposite Richard. Richard moved forward to shake his hand but seeing the scientist's bony hand, he felt it better to leave the formalities aside.

"Thank you for meeting with me Mr. Svensson. I appreciate your time. I wanted to talk to you about a case I am investigating, which may have some connection to you as well" said Richard.

"It is my pleasure detective. It is my duty to help law enforcement agencies in every way possible. Please tell me what you need to know?" asked Karl.

"You were supposed to meet Mr. Jack last week, were you not?" asked Richard.

"Yes, I had an appointment with him last week and, by coincidence, met him in this very hotel, Mr. Richard. A very pleasant man by nature, and soft spoken as well," said Karl.

"Ok this is a good start Mr. Karl. If you do not mind me asking, what did you guys talk about?" Richard asked, continuing his enquiry.

"Sure. We spoke about my work, if you have ever read it. Jack had read my research paper and was, naturally, curious. So, I was just clarifying his doubts, if you may call it that" replied the famed scientist.

"Yes, your work is indeed very intriguing Mr. Karl. I have read your work and find it interesting as well. Your research involves the art of invisibility does it not?" asked Richard

"Well, yes it does, Mr. Richard. It deals with invisibility, not as a mere myth but as a practical, scientific, and possible reality" replied Karl.

Despite being questioned about his work several times during his career, Karl Svensson was somewhat uncomfortable with the questioning.

"Is there a problem Detective Connelly? Has Mr. Jack done something wrong or illegal? Due to my work, I face a lot of criticism as it is. I do not wish to be associated with any more trouble please" implored Karl.

"Well, Mr. Svensson I will not hide anything from you. Mr. Jack was murdered in his apartment. And the weapon was not touched by any person for one week prior to the murder. I fear someone has used your theory of invisibility to commit this murder. I will not force you to be a part of this

investigation if you do not wish to, but it would be a great help if you do” Richard came out with the full story.

Karl Svensson was perturbed by few things in life. His age and research had taught him many things. But hearing this, he was speechless for a few minutes.

“I will definitely help in this investigation Sir” replied Karl after his brief pause. “I will not allow my work to be used for murders or other such works. Tell me what you need to know and I will try my best to help you” he said.

“Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Karl. If possible, do you have a list of all the people who you think are aware of this research? Might be in millions since it is published research, but we need the ones closest to you. We might just find something” requested Richard.

“It is certainly difficult to get all the names detective but my secretary might have a list. I will ask her to mail it to you” replied Karl.

Richard finally felt the wheels of this stagnant cart moving along.

CHAPTER 12

The next morning, while Richard was in a meeting, he heard a text chime on his mobile phone. He checked and discovered it was a text from Mark- Got the data- ready for you.

He realized the scientist's secretary was faster than he had hoped and expected.

He finished his meeting and went straight to Mark, who was ready for him.

"I have the list, Richard. We have one common contact and that is Abby. All the others do not match with Jack's list, I have gone through them," said Mark.

"Great. At least one common link between the two. Find out more about Abby, Mark. We need to meet her. This just got a whole lot interesting," said Richard. He was, now, a lot closer to his end goal. He could just feel it.

Mark nodded and was on his way when Ashton entered the room.

"I need answers Richard. It has been a while since I gave you the case but have not received any updates or alerts from you. What is going on?" said Ashton.

Richard could sense that he was agitated and clearly running out of patience.

"Calm down Ashton. I was just about to call you. We have some leads. Jake met with a scientist last week before he was

murdered. The scientist has given me a list of people whom he interacted with and one of the names matches with Jack's contact list – Abby. Ever heard of her?" Asked Richard.

Ashton was perplexed at the developments.

"Never heard Jack mention Abby. Probably someone he met during college or community weeks, who knows. Kids nowadays are so unpredictable" said Ashton.

His expression was clearly one of a person who is unable to find the final piece of a puzzle.

"What is it, Ashton?" Asked Richard

"Just that why would Jack meet a scientist? Science was his least favorite subject all through student life and I can bet nobody saw him ever hold a science book in his life. Meeting a scientist would be the last thing he would do." Ashton thought.

"Well, the scientist said Jack was very intrigued by his work, which was a research in the science of invisibility. This, in my opinion, is not possible and should never be" opined Richard.

"I get that it can be fascinating to youngsters but it is still a mystery to me. Meet this Abby person, Richard. She might have the missing clues to this mystery" said Ashton.

"Exactly my plan. Mark is just finding out more about Abby. I will visit her and find out all she knows. Might be our best lead. I will keep you informed of any further developments Ashton" said Richard.

Nodding, Ashton left the room.

CHAPTER 13

Abby Shale was a 25-year-old girl, who had lived in London all her life. She worked as a bartender in a downtown bar, called Social Bliss. It was the kind of place where you would want to go once in your life but would never want to visit again.

Located on the back corner of a dark alley, social bliss had a corrugated red door as an entrance. Dark hallways were lined with gawdy paintings with bright colors. Tin tables and chairs, covered with a dirty cloth, were just the tip of the iceberg and the better part of all things broken.

Small bulbs gave a faint reddish glow to the place and the only source of light for the club.

Richard entered the place and found himself to be curiously intrigued by the place. He found Abby behind the bar, mixing cocktails for a group of rag- looking college kids.

He waited for Abby to finish and moved over to her.

"One Scotch on the rocks for me please" said Richard

"Sure" said Abby, smiling at him.

"How come you work here as a waitress? Really surprising for me" Richard came straight to the point.

Abby looked up suspiciously

"What do you mean? Who are you?" she asked.

“Detective Richard Connelly MI6. I wish to talk to you about a case I am investigating” said Richard.

“Not here. Any trouble at my place of work and I will be fired. I will meet you in the alley behind the bar. Give me 5 minutes” Abby was tense by this unexpected visit by a detective.

“Ok fine. See you outside then” Richard finished his drink and left the bar.

Outside, Richard was counting the houses surrounding the bar and estimating the average business the bar could be doing at best when Abby came out the back exit.

She had changed out of her bartender uniform and was wearing black jeans, a loose grey top and thigh high black boots.

“What do you want?” Abby asked curtly.

“Did you meet a scientist Karl Svensson recently?” asked Richard. He wanted to gauge Abby’s reaction, but was mildly surprised when Abby seemed perfectly neutral.

“Yes, I did” she said coolly. “Is it a crime now to meet scientists as well?” she asked, irritated.

“Absolutely not Abby. And do you know a man named Jack?” Abby did not disappoint this time. She was taken aback and was clearly at a loss for words.

“I do. Jack is a dear friend. I have known him for some time now. He is a relative of London’s mayor, is he not?” said Abby. She was clearly uncomfortable with this line of questioning.

“Yes, he is. He was murdered Abby, in his own home, and the murder weapon had not been touched for days. Your name

was found in his contact list. You also met Karl Svensson at his science meet, where Jack was present. What is the connection, Abby?" Richard asked, somewhat forcefully.

Abby looked like she was going to faint. She had to hold the wall to keep still.

"Look, I know it is a lot to take in. But, as you know, this is a high- stakes investigation. I need all the help I can get, Abby. Do you know anything which can be used to find the murderer?" Sensing Abby's uneasiness, he added- "Do this for your friend Abby?"

Abby, still doubtful, as she did not wish to be engaged in a murder trial, shrugged, and said "Fine. I will tell you what I know."

CHAPTER 14

I met Jack at a science conference two years back in Warsaw, Poland” began Abby.

Richard simply nodded in a signal for her to go on. He did not wish to break her flow.

Abby sighed and continued. “He was there with one of his friends Max. Max was quite intrigued but Jack looked as if he could be out at the first chance given to him” said Abby.

This was in line with all that Richard had learnt from Ashton that Jack was not interested in science.

“When they were planning to leave, Max bumped into a famed Swedish scientist Karl Svensson. I know this because I was with Svensson at that moment having a discussion about his latest paper” continued Abby.

“One minute Abby. One question. Why were you so intrigued with his latest paper?” asked Richard.

“Because his paper was about invisibility and I wanted to know more about this. I had read about it in books but had always thought of it as mere fiction. This was the first time someone claimed it was scientifically and practically possible. I was curious, that is all” replied Abby.

“Sure. I was just asking. Go on please” said Richard.

“I could see that Jack was beginning to gain interest in Karl’s theory and Max was already interested. After meeting

with Mr. Svensson, we went for a walk and spoke about his theory in detail” continued Abby.

“So, you just bonded over a scientific theory?” asked Richard, incredulous.

“Science does not only deal with bonds of molecules, Mr. Richard. It can create bonds in real life as well” said Abby, chuckling.

“Alright. So, you guys discussed this scientific theory. What happened then?” enquired Richard.

“We remained in touch, even after the conference. We met and discussed this invisibility theory. Max was convinced we could do it and wanted to try turning himself invisible” continued Abby.

Richard was now becoming interested in this story.

“Jack and I did not believe in this and thought Max went overboard with his enthusiasm. Jack tried to convince Max to let it go but Max was adamant. He wanted to become invisible. Said he had things he could do if he became invisible,” said Abby.

“Did he ever say what he wanted to do after becoming invisible?” asked Richard.

“Nope. He never discussed his plans with us but said it would be great if he could become invisible and wanted us to help him in using Karl Svensson’s formula on him” replied Abby.

“So, did you help him?” asked Richard.

“No, we did not. I became worried that his intentions were going to take the wrong turn. Jack shared my views. Both of us wanted out of his plans and we told him our views. He

did not take it well initially but then understood and was supportive of our views” came the reply.

“So, were you or Jack in touch with Max about how his decision was going on or what was his progress?” asked Richard.

“I cannot say for Jack but I did not keep in touch with Jack or Max after this episode and neither did I try to get to know what they did after I left. Maybe they reconciled, maybe they didn’t, I don’t know.” Replied Abby curtly.

“Ok thank you so much Abby. You have been a great help in this case. And, sorry for getting you off the job for this.” Said Richard

Abby nodded and left the alley.

CHAPTER 15

Richard was surprised with everything Abby had told him. He was in his office when Mark entered.

"Jack was in touch with Max till a week before his murder. His call records show that, Richard" said Mark.

"We need to get him in and talk to him" completed Richard. "Find him Mark. Get all the information that you can find about him".

That night, while having dinner with Masha, Richard told her about the developments in the case.

"That is a really good lead dad. This Max sounds fishy to me" came Masha's views.

Richard nodded and said "Agreed. But there is one problem in this."

"What is it dad?" asked Masha.

"Just this morning, we came to know that Max has left London for Paris" said Richard. He had spoken to Mark in the evening and enquired about Max's whereabouts. Mark had found out from his sources that Max had left for Paris last week. "I need to go to Paris and find him"

"An International trip. That's good Dad. Might even give you some respite from your hectic work here" said Masha cheekily.

Richard raised an eyebrow and looked at her. "This is for work you understand that right?" he asked.

“Of course,” replied Masha. “When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Tomorrow morning. My flight leaves at 9 am tomorrow morning” replied Richard.

“Great. Then you better take some rest before your flight tomorrow, Dad. It will be a hectic trip for you” said Masha.

Richard nodded. It was, indeed, going to be hectic.

“Take care of yourself till I come back, okay?” Richard said, patting her lightly on the head.

“I will, Dad. It’s not like I am little child anymore” replied Masha, irritated.

CHAPTER 16

The next day, Richard landed at the Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris at 10 am after a one-hour flight.

He went straight to the Cheval Blanc, Paris, on the 1st Arrondissement, where Mark had already made reservations for him.

His room was located on the fifth floor, with huge windows, overlooking the beautiful Seine River.

After having a long bath and eating a breakfast of fresh croissant and coffee, he went for a walk along the Seine to clear his head and decide what to do. He was supposed to meet with the head of Paris Police Department later in the evening.

“Max and Jack, two teenagers meet a scientist and become influenced by his ideas. One is convinced it can work, other, not so much. One tries to implement the idea practically, the other leaves him to it, still not convinced. The second one is murdered by a knife held by someone who did not touch it. Curious case” thought Richard, recounting the incidents of the case.

He had lunch in the dining area of his hotel, and went to the market to buy a small gift for Masha. While moving in the market, he found a purple leather tote bag, and he found it striking and a perfect fit for Masha.

While coming back to his hotel, he found a middle-aged man staring directly at him. At first, he thought he might be mistaken for someone else.

But then, the man started walking directly towards him.

Richard's instinct was to be wary of this incoming stranger. However, he held his ground and waited to see what this man had to say or do.

The man approached Richard and stood in front of him.

"You wish to speak to me?" asked Richard. His hand fingered his gun in his pocket.

"You need to let go" said the man in a heavy, burly voice.

"I am not holding on to anything Sir. As far as this bag is concerned" Richard said, looking down at the bag he had purchased for Masha, "it is empty, and I can carry it myself, thank you."

"You need to let go of your investigation into the Jack murder case" Richard's latest acquaintance said.

"I do not take orders from anyone other than my daughter" said Richard in a terse voice. "And you don't look like her. So, tell me what do you want or get out of my way" he completed.

The man shuffled his big frame slightly and positioned himself directly between Richard and his passage.

Richard aimed for a roundhouse kick with his right leg but the man was clearly anticipating it and he swirled out of Richard's reach.

The man was bulkier but slower than Richard and in the process of moving out of his path, lost his balance and fell face first in the sand.

Richard put a chokehold around his neck and asked him, straining "Tell me who you are and who are you working for?"

The man grunted and tried to free himself from Richard's grasp, but realized it to be impossible soon enough. He exhaled, frustrated.

"Fine" he held up his hand, "I will tell you what I know, but it might not be enough, or even a part of what you really want to know"

"Let me decide that alright? Now shoot," said Richard.

CHAPTER 17

“I am Juan. From Mexico” the burly man began.
“Ok Juan from Mexico. What are you doing here in Paris? And on whose orders were you about to kill me?” said Richard, holding his gun, incase Juan tried something.

“I do not know. I was working as an assistant in a hardware shop when a courier came for me. It had a letter, and a photograph, of you” said Juan.

“And what did the letter say” prodded Richard

“That I had to convince you to drop your investigation into the Jack murder case, and if you refuse, I had to kill you” continued Juan.

“Well, good luck answering questions about my death” said Richard cheekily. “And were you promised something in return or was this pure charity work you were supposed to be doing?” asked Richard.

“I received \$15 million in cheque with the letter and the rest \$10 million was supposed to be deposited in a bank account in Panama after the work was completed” he looked at Richard hopefully “ I was about to get rich” he completed.

“Sure” said Richard, shrugging. He had seen many youngsters being hired to do this work in the garb of earning quick money.

But he had also seen as many perish at the hands of dutiful officers like him, who, despite having loads of sympathy for misguided teenagers, had to do their jobs.

“Any idea who might send this letter? Was it delivered like any other normal letter or did you notice anything suspicious?” asked Richard.

“It was delivered by the regular guy who brought the mail every week. This package was also delivered as a part of my regular mail packages. But since I normally do not receive packages” he shrugged, looking at himself “I found this one to be suspicious” Juan said.

“Then why did you not report it to the police or the authorities? Why agree to do the work?” asked Richard, knowing the answer to the question.

“Who would give up an offer of \$15 million man? Would you? It would change my entire life. I would never have to work anymore and travel the world with no one to ask or tell me anything” came the expected reply.

Richard nodded. This case was getting trickier by the moment.

“I will not report it to the police,” said Richard. He did not want to broadcast his identity as a policeman. “But stay clear of my way and you will be safe.” Said Richard.

“Understood man. No trouble for you.” Said Juan, nodding vigorously.

“One more thing. You are talented, Juan. Don’t waste your time and talents, doing illegal things. Your life and others

around you depend on it and on the work you do. "Said Richard.

Juan nodded, thoughtfully.

"Good. Now be off and focus on your work. Try studying for a bit. It suits children your age. "

Juan left without comprehending this attempt at humor and Richard shook his head at this generation.

When he was leaving, Juan turned and said "Find the person who killed this Jack kid, mate. No murderer should get away".

Richard nodded and left.

CHAPTER 18

Richard was sitting with Dennis Pangborn, the chief of French Police, explaining the purpose of his visit and how the French police could get involved.

Dennis Pangborn was a talented man of about forty. He lived with his wife in a high rise apartment building in Central France and Richard knew he had lost his son to cancer about two years ago. He was not the same ever since. He was a witty and sharp man, capable of understanding situations which could be dangerous. However, he did not need to use his wit to be able to fathom that this was a dangerous situation and Richard was a man capable of doing anything and compromising anyone for his advantage. He knew the British think only for themselves.

“Look, Pangborn. I need to find Max and it is imperative for both our sakes that I do. He is wanted in a high-profile murder trial,” said Richard.

“I understand Richard. But there is one problem. Approximately 100,000 tourists visit Paris every day and during the peak months such as now, this number is even more. Max could be using any identity and could be living anywhere. How do you intend to find him?” Said Dennis.

Dennis Pangborn wanted Richard out of his country as soon as possible.

Even though Richard wanted to be positive in his search for Max, he had to concede that Dennis had a point.

"I know it is tough Dennis. But I have to find him. I need your help in this Dennis. Do you have cameras installed on key roads and checkpoints?" he asked.

"Yes, we do. We can have a look at all of them if you want but that would take a lot of time, Richard. There are millions of roads and checkpoints here in Paris itself, not to mention if our culprit crossed over to any other city, we would be drowning in camera footage." Dennis informed him.

He hated Dennis questioning every move Richard was trying to make but he also hated Dennis for being right every time.

"If he came to France to lose himself in the crowd, he would, most likely, limit himself to Paris. Paris is crowded, has people from all the cities in the world. It can be impossible to identify one person in this sea of people" Richard calculated.

"Right. So, now we have some sort of geographical location, we can definitely take a look. I will ask my team to compile CCTV footage of all of Paris. I will let you know when we are finished so you can come down and have a look. Ok?" asked Dennis.

Richard was glad he had Pangborn for help. He could not fathom what he would have done otherwise.

He nodded. He thanked Dennis for his help and went out into the cool Parisian night, looking for a place for something to eat.

CHAPTER 19

Richard found himself unable to sleep at night. He went for a walk to clear his head.

He found himself to be strangely alone in this romantic city. He wished his wife and Masha could be here with him.

His wife loved Paris and would always say to him whenever they visited the city “Wouldn’t it be great if we could just stay in this city and never go anywhere else. London seems so crowded by comparison.”

Masha loved it for the shopping and the branded clothes she could find here, which would not be found even in the most expensive markets of London.

“This picturesque location, the ever-flowing Seine, the romantic Eiffel Tower- this city has so much to look forward to. But underneath this grandeur, there also exists an underbelly of crime, and criminals. Which is true for all major cities in the world, but is particularly exceptional for a city such as this” thought Richard.

Walking through the streets, he came across an ice cream parlor. He paused his train of thought and went to the ice cream parlor and ordered one double chocolate fudge.

While eating, with his back to the wall and facing the door. Whether in his personal capacity, or professional one, he preferred to keep his vigil and alertness at the highest level.

He was finished with his fudge and was about to leave after paying the cheque when he noticed two men, wearing black overalls, and brandishing guns, entering the parlor.

He did not want to raise suspicions, so Richard got up to leave. The two men rounded on him. One of them said "You were told to stay away from the Jack murder case but you transformed on of our guys to be the good person. What exactly is your problem?"

"From losing my wife to almost losing my life in many missions, my list of problems is endless. But why bother you with my problems. And the cases I investigate do not need validation from you so get out my way before you end up like your mate," said Richard.

"Look man. I have no issues with you and do not wish to be engaged with law enforcement. I was told to get you out of the way so here I am. These are powerful people. Do not mess with them" the man warned.

"Since childhood, I have this problem of messing with all the wrong people and an even bigger habit of winning against them," said Richard. "Powerful people do not scare me and do me favor and tell your boss that" said Richard.

He sidestepped the guy and left the ice cream parlor, thinking "Who is this person keeping track of all my activities?"

CHAPTER 20

After two days of moving around, Pangborn finally called Richard “Richard. We have the footage that you need. Can you come down to the office?” he said.

“I will be right there Dennis” replied Richard. He should have some clues now.

He was about to leave his hotel when he received a call from Mark.

“Hi Mark. How is MI6 doing in my absence?” asked Richard.

“Without lying I can say pretty well. How is the case going? Got anything significant?” continued Mark.

Richard told Mark everything that had transpired since he landed in Paris.

“Should you not inform the police of these threats?” asked Mark.

“I can handle these threats, Mark. I need to know who is behind all these threats and who murdered Jack” was a rhetorical question the Richard needed answers to.

“Any clue or idea from the police department of Paris?” asked Mark

“I met with the chief of police. He is getting the footage of the road networks in Paris to see if Max came here and to where he is headed,” said Richard.

“So, any updates on the footage? I am sure Ashton is eager to listen to any updates regarding this case,” said Mark.

He could not tell Richard that Ashton called twice a day inquiring about updates from the case and whether Richard made any progress. He knew Richard was under a lot of stress already, without having to worry about the developments in London.

“Yes, he called me right now that they have the footage and that I should come down and have a look,” said Richard.

“That sounds like good news. You must go and check. Let me know if you find anything” said Mark, hopeful.

“I will, Mark. This case has international repercussions, not to mention the political ones in London. Let’s hope the Paris police chief has something to tell me. Talk to you later Mark” Richard ended the call.

Well, thought Mark, London does have a peculiar way of dealing with its mess in front of the whole world, so this case ending up in Paris did not surprise him one bit.

He just hoped Richard could get to the base of it in time to prevent London’s reputation from plummeting further.

CHAPTER 21

Richard entered Pangborn's office precisely half an hour after his call with Mark ended.

"Hi Dennis" said Richard, walking in his office "So let's get to the point. What do you have for me?" he said.

"Hi Richard. We have the CCTV footage of the of the roads of Paris, just as your asked. Most of it is just endless footage of cars moving about. But, we have something that might interest you," said Dennis Pangborn.

He tilted the laptop in front of him so that Richard could see the screen clearly.

What Richard saw; he could not understand.

He saw Ashton getting out a black Limousine in front of a laboratory. He waited for a few moments outside the building, speaking on the phone with someone. He was shouting and gesturing aggressively.

From the looks of it, he was frustrated with the issue on call.

But, what happened next perplexed Richard even more.

Ashton moved towards the door and went inside. After a few moments, he came out with another person with him. Ashton's companion was a young boy with freckles on his face and curly hair. They got into a car and drove off.

"Jack" breathed Richard.

"One of them is your Mayor Ashton, right?" asked Dennis "I have seen him in the news channels a few times. Who is the boy with him? Do you recognize him?" he asked.

"Yes, one of them was the Mayor and the other one was Jack, the boy who was murdered and whose killer I am looking for" replied Richard.

"Oh" Pangborn was visibly shocked "So this is why you called this case a high- profile one. This is some relative of a Mayor. He exited a lab on Rue de Rivoli. Must have been one hell of a lab. It is one of the most well- known streets in Paris." Said Dennis.

"Well, indeed it must be" said Richard. "I will see you later Dennis. Need to go to the lab urgently" he left the lab in a hurry.

On his way out, Richard called Mark "That was fast" said Mark as he picked the phone. "Any updates?" he asked.

"Yes Mark. Listen to me. I am in a hurry, so there is no time to explain. Just keep in mind do not tell Ashton anything about our inquiry and if he asks just say I have not been in touch with you.

Also, keep an eye on him. Follow him or get one of your investigators to follow him. I need constant updates on what he doing or who he is meeting. Everything needs to be tracked Mark" said Richard.

"Got it. But why this sudden interest in Ashton? Has he done anything?" asked Mark, clearly excited now.

"I will tell you all about it later, Mark. There is no time now. Just understand this- in this case, everyone is a suspect" Richard hung up.

This is an unexpected development, thought Mark. What could make Richard doubt Ashton? What motive could Ashton have for murdering his own Godson?

There were just too many questions and no answers. He shrugged and called one of his investigators to keep an eye on Ashton.

CHAPTER 22

Richard entered the laboratory. It was a small place with shuttered windows and white walls and bland curtains. A framed photo of Napoleon Bonaparte adorned the walls of the entrance directly above the reception.

Richard walked up to the receptionist. She was a young girl of approximately 26 years of age, bright red lipstick, wearing black top and blue jeans. She was clearly disinterested in everything around her and was busy texting on her mobile phone.

She looked up when Richard walked up to her.

"What can I help you with?" she came straight to the point.

"I need to talk to the person in-charge here" said Richard, looking around.

"The boss has not come in yet. He does not have any appointments today so he might not come today. You can take an appointment for tomorrow if you wish to meet him" she gave the whole detail to Richard.

"Who is the owner of this place? What is the purpose of this place?" asked Richard.

"Oh ok. So, this is a research laboratory, run by my boss, the owner of this place, Ashton. He lives in London and is the Mayor there too" she added, almost proudly.

Richard's face betrayed him and he understood he was visibly shocked because the girl asked "Do you know him?"

"Yes, I do. What kind of research do you conduct here?" Richard asked, regaining some composure.

"I am just the receptionist here, man. I do not know what goes on inside. Generally, the people who come here are scientists and they take appointments and conduct their research inside. I do not ask them and neither, frankly, nor do I care" came the reply.

"So, do you charge anything from the scientists who come to conduct their research here?" asked Richard.

"Yes. 50 Euros an hour is the standard rate," said the receptionist.

"Do you have a CCTV camera here?" asked Richard, looking around at the clinic.

"Yes, the security is robust here. And it has to be, we have imminent scientists coming here," said the girl.

"Imminent scientists, such as Karl Svensson? Did he come here?" asked Richard.

"Oh yes. Karl Svensson comes here often. He is conducting research here, for which he comes here. Stays for a few hours and then leaves. He is one good person, tips nicely," said the receptionist.

"Nice" said Richard, before adding "Good for you."

She nodded.

"I need to take a look inside" said Richard curtly.

“No Sir. This is restricted area and you cannot enter without prior appointment” suddenly she became a professional.

“Listen to me-“he did not know her name

“Elena” she completed

“Yes, Elena. This is a murder investigation and hindering an active investigation will not bode well for you or your boss. So, it will be well if you allow me to enter” said Richard, menacingly.

The tone in his voice made Elena flinch. She nodded and motioned towards a locked door at the corner of the hallway, “That way please. The door is unlocked.”

“Good. And one other favor, do not tell your boss I was here,” said Richard.

Elena nodded. She did not want to get into trouble with law enforcement.

CHAPTER 23

Richard entered the laboratory, his head spinning from the interaction with Elena. Svensson came here regularly; Ashton was the owner of the place and Jack was murdered.

All the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle were in front of him, but Richard did not know how to place them together.

What he saw on entering the laboratory puzzled him even more. There was scientific equipment and apparatus everywhere. From test tubes to chemicals in vials, everything was present.

But there were small animals in cages as well. Rats and mice in cages were spread around the room. Richard guessed they were laboratory animals, on whom experiments would be conducted.

“Woah. My first time in an actual scientific laboratory,” said Richard. “I thought I had left all this equipment in school behind me but here they are again. Back to haunt me” he continued.

He looked around for any clues that he could find regarding Svensson’s research or anything that connected Ashton to this investigation.

He saw that there were specific workstations for different scientists. He saw that Svensson’s workstation was the biggest among all of them. He went to the desk labelled Karl Svensson.

It was a very clean desk, almost immaculate. Test tubes were lined in one corner and there were rows and rows of chemicals, in their different colors on the other corner.

He found sheets of paper with Svensson's research in the drawer of the desk. Most of it contained scientific terms that were unknown to Richard but he found one letter in this stack.

The letter was addressed to Ashton.

"Why is Karl Svensson writing to Ashton? What connection could the two possibly have? One is a famous scientist and the other the mayor of London?" thought Richard.

He opened the letter and began reading it.

To Ashton,

The Mayor,

London,

I am in London at present because of my research. I have something that might interest you, in my possession. I need you to meet me next Tuesday at 6 Pm at the usual place.

I hope you understand it can be damaging for both our reputations if we do not meet.

Yours truly,

Karl Svensson.

Richard's head was virtually spinning. What the hell is going on? Svensson wants to meet Ashton and he has some damaging information as well.

There must be some connection between Svensson's research, Ashton's control of the lab and Jack's murder.

Richard had to find out just what exactly the connection was. And they have a common place? How often have they met, thought Richard.

CHAPTER 24

Richard went out of the lab and called Mark. "Hey Richard" came Mark's voice from the other side "Any updates?" he asked.

"The mess just got bigger Mark" said Richard. He went on to explain the whole story to Mark.

"What?" came Mark's shocked reply.

"Ashton owns the lab where Svensson does his research? And Jack was also there? Then why did Ashton appear shocked when we told him about Jack's meeting with Svensson?" came the flurry of questions.

"I don't know Mark" said Richard. "I have the exact same questions" he sighed.

"There must be some solution to this complex situation" mused Mark.

"I am sure there is Mark. But I don't know how to even begin my line of questioning. Today's visit to this lab has confused me even more" replied Richard.

"Do you think it would help if you visited the police chief Pangborn?" Asked Mark.

"This matter is related to individuals from London, Mark. And the events have also taken place there. There is nothing the police force here can do anymore. I will instruct them, however, to keep an eye out for Max and inform me if they find out anything.

I am coming back to London tomorrow, Mark. See you then "said Richard and disconnected the call.

Mark disconnected the call and thought "Will this mystery ever take its final course?"

Richard was about to return to his hotel when his phone rang. He was surprised to see Ashton calling him.

"Yes Ashton?" asked Richard, picking up the call.

"You are in Paris?" asked Ashton. Mark could not keep anything to himself, thought Richard.

"Yes, I am. There were some aspects of the investigation which led me here. I am coming back tomorrow" replied Richard.

"Found anything?" came the next question. Richard was not sure if it was because of his visit or he was hallucinating, but he could hear tension in Ashton's voice.

"No, nothing of importance. I thought I could find a key person associated with this case here but could not track him down. Paris has nothing to do with this investigation," said Richard.

"Richard, do not take me wrong. I have no business telling you how to go about any investigation but focus on what we have at hand. As much as possible, let's keep the investigation focused to London. There are less chances it could go International," said Ashton.

"Yes Ashton, these investigations can take one anywhere. Anyways, I am coming back to London tomorrow. Let's hope it does not take me anywhere else" came Richard's reply.

"Alright. See you in London tomorrow then" said Ashton.

"Okay bye. See you" replied Richard.

This is one suspicious character, thought Richard.

CHAPTER 25

Ashton was sitting in his office when his phone rang. He checked to see it was Karl Svensson.

“What now” muttered Ashton. He was becoming increasingly irritated with this Swedish scientist.

“Have to get rid of him as soon as possible” thought Ashton to himself.

“Yes Karl” he said, picking up the call.

“Ashton. There is one problem. I received a call from the receptionist at the research lab. Someone was there, enquiring about us. I think it was the detective from MI6, Richard” said Karl, almost breathless with stress.

“Are you sure it was Richard?” asked Ashton.

“Based on the description given by the receptionist and the way he was asking questions, it sure sounded like him” came the reply.

“Do not worry Karl. I will keep him in check and will ensure he does not dig deeper in our affairs” Richard reassured him.

“Thanks Ashton, appreciated. I think, though, it might be connected to the murder of that Godson of yours, Jack. That detective met me a few days earlier concerning that” said Karl.

Karl could practically see the man sweating on call.

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier, Karl? He is an English detective. I need to be aware of his investigations" emphasized Ashton.

"I know, Ashton. It happened really quickly and honestly, I did not think of this as a big deal" stammered Karl.

"It is always a big deal when an MI6 agent wants to speak to you, Karl, remember that. I will take care of this and will try to take Richard off our lead" said Ashton. "He is one the best detectives though. Might be difficult task" he added.

"Ok. Keep me updated" said Karl.

"Sure will. Lie low till then" Ashton disconnected the call.

"That means he was lying to me, that Richard. He was off investigating in Paris and told me he found nothing" thought Ashton.

CHAPTER 26

Richard landed in London at 5 in the evening. He went straight to his office, where Mark was waiting for him.

He had already called Mark to inform him of his arrival.

“Did Ashton call?” was Richard’s first question.

“Yes. Five times. Could be even more but I switched off my phone. That man can never let go, can he” replied Mark.

“Apparently not. What did you tell him?” came the next question.

He was not worried much about Ashton’s constant pestering, but the fact that he might find something that would hamper the investigation, worried him.

“Out of all the five times he called, four times he asked about you and whether your flight landed. He wanted me to connect him straight to you as soon as you set foot in London,” said Mark.

“And the one other time?” asked Richard quizzically. Seeing Mark’s confused expressions, he added, “you said he called four times out of five to ask about me, so what about the one other time? What did he ask?”

“Oh that. He just wanted to ask where we keep our surplus supplies from missions. I told him it is kept in a warehouse on east London Street but it is mostly broken and unused” replied Mark.

Richard's brow creased into a frown "Why would Ashton suddenly be interested in a warehouse of spy supplies?" he questioned himself. "It's not like he is going to suddenly start earning money by selling scrap"

Richard turned to Mark "Mark, get me a list of all the supplies in our warehouse, now. And also connect me to Speaker Omnihurst" came the instructions.

"Speaker Aaron Omnihurst? The Parliamentary Speaker? Are you serious Richard? Do you really think it would be wise to involve him?" asked Mark, clearly shocked.

"It's high time, Mark. I have a feeling the shit is about to hit the fan. It is important to protect yourself when that happens, otherwise the first person to be caught up in this mess would be me. Call him" responded Richard.

CHAPTER 27

Aaron Omnihurst was fifty six years of age, clearly awaiting retirement. He had seen his fair share of mayors and MPs in his career and believed it was more than enough to last him a lifetime. He remained irritated with the incompetence of the people around him and tried to talk to them as less as was humanely possible.

He had a house in the hills of Scotland where he wished to settle down with his wife of thirty years, Emilda.

He was a man of integrity, as was made clear when he refused to meet the Prime Minister about the extension of his tenure, in exchange for a sum of \$50 million.

On that particular day, Aaron Omnihurst was eating lunch, his fixed meal for as long as he could remember- a cold ham sandwich and green tea with a drop of honey, when his phone rang.

"Speaker Omnihurst?" came the voice at the other end.

"Speaking. Who is it?" asked the Speaker.

"This is Mark. I am the secretary of Detective Richard Connelly at MI6. He wishes to speak to you," said Mark.

"Alright" replied Aaron. He had vaguely heard the name of this detective. Apparently, he was a bigshot at the MI6, having solved many impossible cases during his tenure.

What does he want with me, thought Aaron. He is in for a surprise if it is a favor.

“Good afternoon, Speaker Omnihurst. It is a pleasure to talk to you. Detective Connelly this side from MI6” said Richard, mustering all the cheerfulness that he could manage in his voice.

“Good afternoon, Detective. I do not wish to be interrupted during my meals. So whatever this is, better be urgent. Please do go on” replied the irritated Speaker.

“Of course, this is urgent, Mr. Speaker. In fact, it might have international ramifications as well. Our relations with France might well be affected” added Richard. He wanted to have the speaker’s complete attention before he explained the situation.

“Oh okay. Then better get to the point here detective.” Richard could hear the nervousness and excitement in the speaker’s voice.

Richard explained everything to Omnihurst. From Jack’s murder to discovering Ashton’s laboratory in France.

Omnihurst did not utter a word while Richard spoke, but if Richard had been sitting in front of him, he would have seen the Speaker’s mouth hanging open in shock.

“This is certainly shocking” said Aaron Omnihurst with all the calm he could manage at the moment.

“It is indeed, Mr. Omnihurst. And one of our own Mayors being involved in this makes the ramifications even greater. I did not know whom I should go to so I came to you” said Richard.

“Alright. I will see what I can do. In the meantime, do not breathe a word of this to anyone. I will make a few calls and get back to you” Aaron disconnected the call.

“What did he say, Richard?” asked Mark.

“The same what every politician says. Keep it a secret and I will take care of it. For the first time, I feel he really should do as he says” replied Richard.

“But Richard, we have an important question which is still unanswered- who killed Jack? Our initial enquiry started with that remember?” asked Mark.

“Oh, I remember that very well Mark. But it is important to understand the circumstances of Jack’s death first. What happened on those last few days that he was alive forms a very important part of this case” commented Richard.

“Like what exactly?” came Mark’s next question.

“Like so many things Mark- his sudden interest in science, which Ashton himself mentioned, though at this point I have zero faith in that guy, his acquaintance with Karl Svensson, personally I find that man and his research a bit odd, and most of all that laboratory in Paris, which was more like a room, but had the common links of Karl, Ashton and Jack” Richard came to the end of his list.

Mark was shaking his head- “Well, when you put it like that, sure, makes sense”

Richard smiled despite the situation.

CHAPTER 28

Aaron Omnihurst was unable to complete his lunch. He kissed his wife goodbye and left for his office.

He went into the Parliament building, nodding grimly at people who acknowledged him. During his career he had made enemies, and calling them few would be an understatement.

He went into his chamber and started pacing around. For the first time in his life, he had no idea what to do. Ashton was a Mayor and if anything amiss about him went out to the public, it would create distrust towards the government.

He called up his friend from the foreign office, Liber to discuss the issue. Obviously, he would leave out the important details.

Liber, just like his name, was a unique man. Aaron had connected with him instantly when they had met at a Government conference almost two decades ago. Both were bored, hungry and had far more knowledge about their respective fields than what the conference told them.

"Hello old man" came Liber's reply from the other end. He had picked up the call on the third ring.

They had their own names for each other- Liber called Aaron old man and Aaron called him the shrewd one.

"Hello shrewd one. How is everything?" asked Aaron. He was delighted to speak to his old friend, even though had

it been in better circumstances, he would have enjoyed it better.

“Top of the world as always” came the shrewd reply. “So, old man, any special reason for this call or do I have the privilege of you missing someone other than your wife for the first time in your life?”

“Well, yeah that and I wanted to speak to you about something important Liber. It concerns the national security of our country” Aaron explained the whole situation while Liber listened silently.

“Oh man! Why can’t these politicians use some brains of theirs for once” came Liber’s frustrated response after Aaron finished. “Let me look into it and I will get back to you” he disconnected the call.

“Well that is what I will have to tell the detective from MI6 the next time he calls me” thought Aaron, holding the disconnected phone in his hand.

CHAPTER 29

Richard, for no specific reason, was in a relatively better mood that day. Whether it was because he had finally told someone in position of power about his case or because his daughter had finally decided to get married, he couldn't tell.

He had met his daughter's future husband, Eric once before. Not that his daughter wanted them to meet but Eric was also a detective. He was a private investigator.

Richard was wary of him at first but soon admired his sense of humor and his wit.

"Dad, I know you will like him" Masha had told him on the way to the Grand Plaza. And she did not disappoint him.

Richard was proud of the woman his daughter had become. But, he was even more proud of her life choices and decisions. They were much better as far as his decisions are concerned.

After receiving congratulatory messages from his colleagues, he went into his office, where Mark was waiting for him.

"Did not think you would be here today, Richard. By the way, congratulations on Masha's impending wedding," said Mark.

“Well, Ashton wouldn’t let me enjoy ever, right? And thanks for wishes. Will tell Masha Mark said hi” replied Richard.

“So, any update from Aaron? Is he doing anything?” asked Richard.

“Nothing so far, Mark. Hopefully he does something soon enough. The trail is hot now but who knows what it stirs up next” commented Richard.

Just as Mark was about to respond, Richard’s phone rang.

It was Aaron.

“Hi Detective. I have consulted a specialist friend of mine in the foreign office regarding the, uh, you know, issue. He has to conduct some research and will get back to me. When he does, I will continue the chain of command” said Aaron.

“Thanks Aaron. So, is this friend of yours reliable? I mean Ashton has connections in all the right places. So?” asked Richard.

“Yes detective he is reliable, working in the foreign office, he can handle secrets. Also, he is our best bet given the circumstances so let’s trust him, huh?” replied Aaron.

CHAPTER 30

Richard was sure this case was coming to an end and that he would finally be able to expose Ashton and Jack's killers. He could just feel it.

He was at his residence and it was 12:30 AM at night. The TV was on, playing the third season of the Simpsons.

But Richard had not heard a word of the show. His mind was occupied with the matter at hand. Despite being a politician, Ashton was the one politician whom he could actually trust or he thought he could trust. And now, he knew that was not the case.

Suddenly, Richard's phone began to ring. It was an unknown number, but he had begun to pick up unknown calls after joining the force. You never know if it's the perpetrator himself or someone calling to threaten you. Either could lead to the color.

"Detective Richard?" came the voice from the other end.

"Yes. Who is it?" asked Richard.

"It's Max. I think you were looking for me?" replied the caller.

"Max? As in Jack's friend Max?" replied Richard, shocked. He could not believe his luck.

Despite his adventures in Paris, he was unable to find Max. And here he was, on a call with Max.

"Yes Max, I was looking for you. Where have you been though?" asked Richard.

"I was in Paris, as you know very well. But I wasn't hiding from you. I was in touch with one of your Mayors only. Didn't he tell you?" now it was Richard's turn to be surprised.

"No kid. Who was the Mayor in touch with you?" Richard asked as politely as he could. He could not afford to scare the kid at this time.

"Said his name was Ashton. Pretty old fashioned, I thought" replied Max. His voice gave no inclination that he was involved in this.

"Alright. So where are you right now, Max? I need to speak to you about Jack. You know he was murdered right?" asked Richard.

"Yeah, I heard. He was a nice guy. My friend too. He shared my interest in science and the views of Karl Svensson" came the reply.

"Yes, the scientist. Will speak about him later. So Jack. Were you good friends with him?" asked Richard.

"Well yes we were" came the prompt reply.

"Ok. Let's meet up tomorrow and you can get me up to speed with everything that has happened so far, deal?" said Richard.

"Deal" said Max.

"And Max one other thing" interrupted Richard.

"Yes?"

"You are a terrible liar" Richard disconnected the call.

CHAPTER 31

Well, let's take a break from the suspense of Richard's investigation and turn to see what our main suspect Ashton is up to.

When Richard was talking to Max about Jack's murder, Ashton was in a bar drinking with Karl Svensson.

Karl was curious to know how Ashton was dealing with Richard.

"Well, to be honest, nothing right now. Since the Paris incident, he hasn't shown up on my radar much" replied Ashton, nonchalantly.

"Just stay vigilant Ashton. He did not seem the sort who will easily give up on a case, and an important and high profile one at that" said Karl.

Just as Ashton was about to respond, his phone started to ring. It was Max.

Oh God what did the kid want now, thought Ashton. The day and the investigation seemed to never end.

"Look kid, you cannot disturb me like this. I have stuff at hand, more important than your whims and childish fantasies" said Ashton, irritated.

"Heylo Ashton it's me Richard" came the voice from the other end. Ashton was about to drop the phone from his hand.

"Hi Richard" said Ashton trying to maintain as much composure in his voice as possible.

“What are you doing with Max’s phone? Where is the kid?” he asked. He was worried the kid will wet his pants and spill everything in front of Richard.

“Nothing just asking him a few questions about his college and stuff. Really intelligent kid. How do you know him by the way?” asked Richard.

Richard was thoroughly enjoying playing with Ashton. He could almost see him squirming in his seat. From the noise in the background he could guess Ashton was at a bar.

This made it even more fun. Richard was about to gate crash a party. Always a dream for him.

“He was a friend of Jack’s. Met him with Jack a couple of times, that’s it. Indeed an intelligent kid” came Ashton’s response.

“Sure. Also, give me regards to Karl Svensson. He has sure lost a lot of weight since I last saw him. But maybe it is because of the stressful work that he does. Talk to you sooner rather than later” Richard disconnected the call.

Ashton was sweating profusely in a well air- conditioned bar. How did Richard know he was with Karl Svensson?

Where was Richard? Was he spying on Ashton?

Ashton was brought back from his thoughts by a scream from Karl. He turned to find Richard standing behind Karl with his gun aimed at the scientist’s temple.

“Don’t worry Ashton. I will not kill him, or you for that matter. And definitely not in this bar filled with civilians. Nice place by the way.

Let’s talk, shall we?” said Richard.

“Sure. What do you want to know Richard? You realize I am a Mayor right? You cannot even touch me without making it a big scandal and jeopardizing your career” said Ashton with a smirk.

But his smile was short lived as he saw Aaron Omnihurst entering the bar and walking towards him.

“Speaker Omnihurst. What a pleasant surprise seeing you here. What can I do for you?” said Ashton, with as much congeniality as he could muster.

What was the speaker doing here, he thought.

“I think you have already done enough, Mayor” came the Speaker’s reply.

“What are you implying, Speaker?” asked Ashton, almost innocently.

“At this age, I do not have the patience to play these games, Ashton. Out with your truth or I am having you disbarred from Parliament for the rest of your life and arrested right now” said Aaron, strictly.

Richard was almost impressed with the way the speaker was handling the matter. And after so many years in MI6, few things impressed him.

“I do not know what you are talking about?” Ashton said, looking quizzically at Richard now.

“We know you were involved in Jack’s murder and that you instructed Max to kill him. You employed the Swedish scientist Karl Svensson to work for you and convinced him to give his disappearance potion to Max” Richard was almost breathless from speaking.

“Well, a very nice theory Richard but a theory most certainly. Do you have any proof of the fact that I am guilty?” asked Ashton.

As if by a miracle, Max appeared from behind the pillar next to their table.

Ashton’s face became ghostly white and he sat down, breathing heavily.

“Alright. Yes, I planned Jack’s murder. He was one big liability on my head. He wanted to go to Oxford University, which was very expensive. He was not serious about studies and I could see that” Ashton said.

“So, you killed him because he wanted to study?” asked Richard, incredulous.

CHAPTER 32

“No Richard. I can be many things but I am not stupid you know. Jack told me about this scientist Karl Svensson and that he was very inspired by his works. He wanted to meet him and research about his theories” continued Ashton.

“Okay... and?” Richard was still not convinced about Ashton’s intentions

“And I conducted my own research into this Swedish scientist. I am not the devil you think I am. He was my best friend’s son for God’s sake, Richard” said Ashton.

“He was your best friend’s son then why did you get him killed?” asked Richard.

“I did not get him killed, Richard. It was Karl Svensson” came the revelation.

“Okay now you are just making things up Ashton. Why will a world renowned Swedish scientist kill a British kid who is actually interested in his theories, when most of the world would find his theories absurd, not to mention I do” said Richard.

“I know Richard. But I am not making it up. Let me explain it to you” Ashton sat down comfortably in his seat to explain exactly what had transpired.

CHAPTER 33

“Ok let’s hear it then Ashton” said Richard.
“Ok. But no interruptions Richard” said Ashton, jokingly.

“You have my word as long as you stick to the point Mayor Ashton” came the response from the detective.

“Okay. When I started my enquiry into Karl Svensson, I found it to be fishy because he had many followers on his social media handle who firmly believed in his theory but when I went to his seminar, there were hardly ten people there” Ashton stopped when he saw Richard looking at his watch in an exasperated manner.

“I am sure you have many other important places to be, Detective. I am willing to stop my story right away” came Ashton’s curt response.

“Well, I am a man of my word Ashton. I said no interruptions till the time you stick to your point. You digress, I divert” came the retort.

“I am not digressing. This is important in the chain of events” said Ashton.

“Anyways,” continued the Mayor. “Being a Mayor, I have various resources available at my disposal, of which you are well aware Richard” Ashton nodded at the MI6 detective after receiving a nod from the other end.

"I utilized those resources and found that he is not really a scientist at all" said Ashton.

"What do you mean not a scientist?" came Richard's reply.

"He is not an actual scientist Richard. He is a fraud, manipulating the general population like pawns. His theory, which gained traction, was just pure luck" replied Ashton.

"Do you expect me to really believe what you are saying?" asked Richard incredulous.

"That is up to you Richard. I will not force you to believe me. But, I have all the proofs you need at my office. If you want, I can have it sent to you" came the Mayor's reply.

"Well, I will validate it. Of that you can be sure" said the detective.

CHAPTER 34

Richard called Mark as soon as he was out of earshot. Having excused himself to go to the washroom, he wanted information and he wanted it now.

"Yes Richard. All ok?" asked Mark the instant he picked the call.

"Mark listen to me. I want to know everything there is to know about Karl Svensson. The internet, books, police files and records, everything Mark" said Richard, the urgency clear in this voice.

"Sure ok but I sent a file on the scientist to you earlier also Richard. It had everything" replied Mark.

"Double check it, Mark. In case, something got missed or left out. It is crucial that I know more about the scientist than the man himself" instructed Richard.

"On it, Richard. Will contact you when I have everything ready?" asked Mark.

"Ok but make it quick" Richard said disconnecting.

He went back to where Ashton was waiting. "What proofs do you exactly have, Ashton?" asked Richard.

"I went to his laboratories. All of them. I wanted to find out all about him since Jack was so adamant about learning more from him. I was his mentor, give me some benefit of doubt. I am not a monster" said Ashton.

Richard shrugged.

"Well anyways. I found he had a laboratory in Paris. So I went to check it out with my own eyes. There was nothing there Richard! All empty. Just a few test tubes here and there and that's it" said Ashton in a single breath. He was clearly quite affected with all this.

"But then why would he kill Jack? He was perhaps his only follower?" asked Richard, inquisitive.

"Because Jack was onto him. Or if not exactly onto him, he understood something was fishy. You know Jack was a brilliant kid. He could tell fishy from genuine. I found some of his notes later on and his calculations clearly contradicted Karl's theory" replied Ashton.

"So Jack was murdered because of a suspicious theory?" asked Richard, incredulous.

"You don't understand the world of science Richard. It is not just chemicals and experiments. It is more about reputation than about actual science or findings. Had Jack found out that Karl was a fraud, he would have released it to the press" replied Ashton.

"Okay, if you say so. Can we prove it though? That Karl Svensson murdered Jack?" asked Richard.

"Well, here is where the main problem lies. Karl Svensson is a renowned scientist, and not by a small margin. We need solid proof in this case. I have been trying to gather evidence. But, he is a very shrewd man, this scientist. There is nothing at all, even remotely linking this man to Jack or his murder" came Ashton's dejected reply.

"I will look for proof against him, Ashton. But how can I be sure that whatever you have said till now is true? That you are not the one who killed Jack?" questioned Richard.

"Of course you have reason to be suspicious of me Richard. And I will not use my power as the mayor to stop you from doing your duty. But trust me I am not the murderer here" said Ashton, looking down at the floor, clearly trying to hide his tears.

Richard, unsure whether to acquit this man in front of him or not, simply nodded.

"I know I have tried to stop you in the past from going ahead with this investigation, but that only because I didn't want Karl getting suspicious and covering his tracks. You have to arrest him, Richard. You owe this to Jack and to our country as a detective" finished Ashton.

Richard's head felt like it was going to explode. He needed to sleep on this information he had just heard. It was just too much to process for half an hour.

He said- "Look Ashton, whether you are telling the truth or not, I'll find out sooner or later, trust me on that. I'll see you in your office later."

Ashton nodded and just as Richard was moving out of the hotel, he gestured to the waiter to get him his scotch on the rocks.

CHAPTER 35

Richard was confident he would not be able to stay alone in his apartment at this time so he went to Masha's place.

"Hi dad!" exclaimed Masha when she opened the door, clearly surprised to see him at this hour.

"Hi kiddo. All good?" enquired Richard.

"Ok what's wrong? You haven't called me kiddo since I passed fourth grade" said Masha.

Richard realized that it was true when people said kids start behaving like your parents after a certain age.

He told Masha everything that happened that day. He guessed Masha would scold him for not seeing through this earlier or would sympathize with him for it being a difficult case. However what Masha said took him completely by surprise.

"Looks like Karl Svensson beat you to it dad. You have to arrest him. Get at least some of your prestige back"

Ignoring the sarcasm at the end of the sentence, he realized Masha was right. He had to complete this case and get himself back on track. He had to find out what was the crux of this case.

But what could he do? By accusing a Swedish scientist of murder, he could trigger a diplomatic row with Sweden and

that certainly was not an option. He could speak to the Prime Minister but that would not lead to anything productive.

He had to talk to Ashton about this. Only he could suggest what to do and how can they expose the scientist. Even though he did not trust the mayor, but as far as his story goes, he does have a personal motive to find the culprit.

CHAPTER 36

Richard called Mark to tell him the details of all that had happened so far in the case.

“So, what do you think, Richard?” asked Mark “Is Ashton telling the truth? Could it really be the Swede?”

“There is no way to tell, Mark. The only option that we have is to go ahead and listen to what he has planned. We have to take this risk to get to the bottom of this mystery” came Richard’s response.

“Hmm. Agreed Richard. But we need to maintain caution in dealing with Ashton. This can very easily end both our careers. You think we should keep Aaron in the loop?” asked Mark.

“That is a good idea, Mark. The experts must always be kept in the loop. I will call and update him” Richard ended the call.

While he was calling Aaron, Aaron was once again trying to complete his meal. The double cheese hamburger and large fries with extra dip was waiting in front of him. He had taken his cholesterol medication precisely twenty five minutes earlier, and was waiting for the clock to complete the remaining five minutes so that he could divulge in his meal.

Just as the last thirty seconds remained, his phone rang.

He checked the screen, flashing Richard- MI6. He was so sure he would definitely get this detective fired for his horribly wrong timing.

He looked at his meal just as the clock struck half an hour, sighed and answered the phone.

As much as he tried to, he could not let his work get affected.

"Yes detective. It better be important for me to be delaying my meal, if I may add, again" said Aaron.

"Well I would apologize for delaying your meal but I figured you would like to know what is happening with the investigation" came the detective's response.

"Sure shoot" said Aaron, looking longingly at his meal. Other than his work, his food was the only part of his life that excited him.

While Richard narrated what was happening, Aaron's expressions started changing. It shifted from suspicion to vague to shock in a matter of seconds.

"Are you sure Detective that Ashton mentioned Karl Svensson? I am sure you know the implications of what you are saying but let me spell it out for you. This is going to create a diplomatic storm for everyone involved" came Aaron's shocked response.

"I am well aware of the implications Aaron. But I, myself am still processing whether to believe Ashton or not. Can you meet him with me in an hour? I need to make a decision quickly. If Ashton is telling the truth, we need to catch this Karl Svensson for murder" suggested Richard.

“Fine. Meet me at Piazza Grand in sixty minutes” Aaron replies, disconnecting the call.

Well, I am about to get myself into some big mess, thinks Aaron to himself, while Richard calls Ashton to tell him about the meeting.

“Alright Richard. I will be there in an hour. But hopefully you are trying to make some plans how to nab Karl. It is important to me, Richard” replies Ashton after Richard gives him a brief.

“Yes Ashton, don’t worry” is Richard’s response.

CHAPTER 37

The three men, Richard, Ashton and Aaron are sitting in the dining hall of Piazza Grand.

“So gentlemen. Both of you are well aware of the situation and the dynamics around this case of Jack’s murder. What do you suggest, how do we proceed?” asks Richard, looking at Aaron.

“Well, surprisingly Richard, I agree with Ashton. He might be right about Karl Svensson being the murderer. The only thing that I am unsure about is the motive of the murder. Look, Karl was most probably a fraud with no scientific background but Jack was perhaps the only one who was following his theories. So why kill him?” asked Aaron.

Both Richard and Aaron looked at Ashton, waiting for his response.

“Well, honestly, I believe Jack knew something about the Swede which could be detrimental to his image” replied Ashton.

“Okay so now we need to get the life history of Karl Svensson” said Aaron, clearly exhausted and bored.

“Well, yes that too” said Ashton, brooding.

“Out with it Ashton” said Richard, looking suspiciously at him.

“Out with what, Richard?” asked Ashton, waking up from his trance.

“Clearly there is something you know and haven’t told us. It is as clear as a transparent sheet on your face” replied Richard.

“Well, ever since Jack’s death, and finding out about this Swedish scientist, I have been keeping tabs on his movements. He met with the Russian president Putin a few days back. A scientist can surely meet with various heads of states for different reasons but why Russia. And this visit would have never been allowed by the Swedish Government. We all know the relations Sweden shares with Russia, especially since the Ukraine issue came up” finished Ashton.

“Alright, I understand it is weird that Karl met Putin, but what could that possibly have to do with this murder investigation?” replied Richard.

“Okay gentlemen” said Aaron, for the first time, “I guess it’s time for me to speak. I hope both of you know the nature of the Russians, taking in criminals and other outlaws from various countries, right?” he asked.

Both Richard and Ashton nodded in mute response.

“Something similar applies in this case as well. Our beloved Swedish scientist, Karl Svensson, is a Russian citizen!” exclaimed Aaron, and bowed as a dancer who has just finished his final act.

Richard looks on in disbelief while Ashton chokes on his glass of water.

“What?” both exclaim simultaneously.

“Yes gentlemen. Even though Karl Svensson is a Swede by birth, he gave up his Swedish citizenship when he turned eighteen. By then he was already studying Russian history at University of Moscow. Russian influence worked on him and

he became a Russian citizen. The world is unaware and still refer to him as a Swedish citizen, but all the Governments and intelligence services around the world are aware of this fact" finished Aaron.

"That is fine, Aaron" replied Richard. "We value your detailed knowledge about Karl Svensson, but again, he might be a citizen of Mongolia for all I care but we need to get him to face justice."

"Understand, Richard. I was not telling you this because I needed my time of story- telling. This is significant because Russians do not allow persecution of their citizens on foreign soil. This is a very significant diplomatic escalation in bilateral relations if we charge Karl with murder" said Aaron, looking significantly grave.

"Didn't you know about all of this? You are a Mayor for God's sake Ashton. At least give me one reason in my life time to believe it" said Richard, looking furiously at Ashton.

"I am not responsible for foreign affairs Richard" replied Ashton, exasperated.

"Yeah well what do we do now?" asked Richard looking at Aaron and Ashton in order.

"We can do one thing. If we are somehow able to get Karl to admit that he is the murderer, it gives us a good reason to charge him" came Aaron's response "But how are we going to do that is all up to you guys, field work is not my forte."

"He is a scientist Aaron, not a fool" replied Richard. "Why will he admit to having committed a murder?" he asked.

“What if he feels that committing to murder is better than a potentially bigger conviction?” Aaron wondered.

“What are you trying to say?” asked Ashton, his interest piqued.

“Well, I do not have a plan ready but just a vague idea. We cannot ask him to admit to committing murder but we can charge him with something far more serious so that the murder conviction appears significantly smaller in comparison” replied Aaron, with a spark in his eyes.

“Great idea Aaron” said Richard, grinning.

“Nice. Now we just need to work on the conviction. I will ask my lawyers to prepare a draft” said Ashton.

“Ok so let’s meet tomorrow, same time, same place and get this scientist” said Richard.

The three men clinked their glasses and finished their drinks.

CHAPTER 38

Richard went to his MI6 office after drinks with Aaron and Ashton and met with Mark.

“Are you serious, Richard?” replied Mark when Richard told him everything that had happened earlier that day. “We work in MI6, and you know very well there nothing more serious than a murder charge, right?” he asked.

“Well, now that you tell me, Mark, can’t espionage be a charge? Be a Russian, we can easily convict him for spying, right?” Richard mused.

“Richard, he needs to be actually spying for us to frame him for that. We cannot just barge into anyone’s place and accuse him of espionage. Even though we are dealing with a Russian, we are not Russians” Mark concluded.

“Well, true that” came Richard’s reluctant response.

Later when Richard dialed Aaron and told him about his little idea, he said, “That’s pretty good Richard. And we might be onto something here. He might actually be spying, for all we know. Let’s test it” he said.

“But how?” asked Richard.

“Well, it will be tricky, and since espionage is serious, we have to be careful. And Richard, Mark is right. We cannot just frame false charges, we need proof. The Russians will take us to all the courts on the planet to prove that we are lying” said Aaron.

“Got it. Shall I send a detective to follow Svensson? If we keep track on his activities, we will definitely find something?” asked Richard.

“Of course detective” replied Aaron, with a slight smile on his face. Detectives can only think in one direction, he thought.

“However, honestly, I don’t think it’s going to achieve much. I think, you need to go to Russia yourself detective. There are many secrets and opportunities to be explored in Russia, if I may call it that. You should be there to see them” replied Aaron.

“Well, ok. Then I’ll leave this evening itself. Let’s see what Russia has to offer” came Richard’s response.

CHAPTER 39

That evening, Richard called up Masha to tell her about his trip to Russia. “Be careful dad. You know I worry about you” was her reply.

“I know darling. I will be back before you know it” said Richard.

When Richard landed in Moscow at 11:30 pm on a Qatar Airlines flight (there were very few airlines operating over the Russian airspace since the war with Ukraine began), he was stunned. It was the most picturesque location he had ever seen.

The landscape had a completely serene and scenic atmosphere.

He exited the airport and checked into the Helvetia Hotel, where Mark had booked him for the next one week. The hotel was one of the best in Russia.

As he was leaving the lobby, he saw the CCTV camera scanning him. He did not want the people tracking him to get disappointed so he waved at the camera and flashed his most dazzling smile at them.

Well, he knew was going to be tracked, didn't he? The West and the Russians did not hide their suspicions towards each other.

He went to his room and took a long, hot water bath and slept away his jetlag with a deep four-hour sleep.

When he left his hotel, it was almost 7:30 in the evening. He went to a bar and ordered their most expensive whiskey. As he sat drinking, he began reminiscing about his life. Such twists and turns could only be seen in a movie or a book.

Richard was the intelligent boy in school, always coming first in academics and sports. His parents wanted him to become a doctor. But when, one day, he saw the MI6 office building (his father pointed it out to him, despite being concealed, his father knew each and every building in London), he knew he had to be working there.

The building drew Richard to itself, like a magnet pulling iron filings. When Richard cleared his intelligence analyst degree, he went to Switzerland with his friends to celebrate.

That was the one decision he would regret his entire life. His friends got him addicted to weed and consequently, to all other kinds of drugs. Being a drug addict, he wasn't exactly welcome to MI6.

He had, then been saved by his father, who requested his officers to defer his enrolment by a year. Richard's father, Maurice, was a principled man. Even though he never questioned Richard's decision to join MI6 (he had deliberately shown Richard the building that day to arouse his interest as he was really passionate about his son joining the force), he wanted Richard to do well wherever he went.

So after a year of rehabilitation and struggle with drugs, Richard finally got to MI6. The past year motivated him to be his best version at work. He completed his tasks and assignments before time, his superiors loved him and he got the fastest promotions ever.

In the mean- time, he met the love of his life and Masha's mother Sara. Sara was a journalist intern, covering one of the MI6 missions, led by Richard. The rest, as we know, is history. They got married and within a year had Masha with them. But again, his happiness was short lived. Sarah's plane crashed and left them shortly after Masha's birth.

Now, Richard was tasked with taking care of his daughter and earning a living. Masha has always encouraged him to get married again not punish himself with the loneliness. He has been too tired and busy with his life to start again. Also, he does not want to give himself the satisfaction of moving on when Sara couldn't.

While reminiscing, Richard saw Anatoly Volkov walk into the bar. He was pretty familiar with Volkov and had had a few chance encounters with him. For an introduction, Volkov was the head of the Russian spy agency, the GRU. But what was Volkov doing here, thought Richard.

Then he remembered- This is a bar Richard. Everyone comes here to have a drink. Maybe, he himself has had too much to drink. That was why he was having these weird thoughts.

Just when he was about to leave, Richard saw Volkov had company and that company was none other than the famed scientist, Karl Svensson.

And for the record, it did not look like a chance encounter. The shaking of hands and exchange of smiles and drinks clearly indicated something was fishy. Well, Aaron was right. The answers to the mystery were in Russia.

Richard moved closer to their seats on the bar, on the pretext of having another drink. They were talking in

whispered voices but Karl was gesturing animatedly and was clearly trying to explain or justify something to Volkov.

“No Karl it is not going to happen. The higher ups will never agree to this. It can cause an International scandal” Volkov was saying.

“You are not understanding Anatoly. It can happen and it will definitely yield results” replied Karl.

“No Karl. I cannot approve this. If you want, you can speak to Mikhael. He might be able to help you with it” Volkov finished his sentence and his drink. He picked up his phone from the table and left.

Karl shook his head and got up and left.

Richard could not believe his luck. He had stumbled into an important conversation and had, most likely heard important stuff.

He dialed Aaron and Ashton in a conference call immediately.

“Do you own a watch detective?” asked Aaron, irritated. He was clearly sleeping.

“Well yes but it is set to Russian time Aaron” replied Richard honestly.

“It is late here Richard. What is it?” asked Ashton.

“You won’t believe it but I have just heard a very interesting conversation. And guess what? It was between Anatoly and Karl” said Richard, excitedly.

“These your friends, detective?” asked Aaron.

“Apologies Aaron. It was a conversation between Karl Svensson the scientist and Anatoly Volkov, the Russian spy chief” detailed Richard.

“Go on” said Ashton, clearly awake.

Richard detailed the conversation he had heard between the two men and how there was a clear Russian involvement through Karl Svensson in something sinister.

“Good job detective. There are advantages to drinking in bars that only we can understand. Keep your eyes and ears open for more” said Aaron, after Richard had finished.

“Yes Richard. This is a great beginning, albeit a chance one. Let’s hope we reach the bottom of this and find out who killed Jack and why” replied Ashton.

Richard disconnected the call and started walking towards his hotel.

CHAPTER 40

The next morning, Richard left his hotel and started his visit to Moscow by going to the Tverskaya Street, the most famous of all Russian markets. He thought he could gather more information about Russia and it's functioning from markets and talking to locals than any other official places.

He reached a restaurant called Rybniy bazaar and ordered his standard fish and chips. While the pretty waitress was serving him his red wine, he asked her "Do you speak English?"

She smiled and replied "Spent five years in New York, so yeah I speak English".

"Do you have any regular customers here? Any high profile ones?" he knew the waitresses liked to brag about the important customers in their shop.

And it had just the desired effect. Her smile widened and she began nodding.

"Oh yes. Anatoly Volkov, Karl Svensson, the famed scientist and others including Mr. Putin himself have been here several times" she replied.

"Your place must be quite the rage here around" Richard commented.

"It definitely is" she responded, happy now.

So now he knew the place where the important people hung out. As he was heading out, he recognized Mikhael Mishustin walk in. Mishustin was a close aide of President Putin and by luck, Richard's friend.

"Mikhael, my friend" he called out.

"Richard?" Mishustin turned around and spotted Richard. "What are you doing here in Moscow?" he enquired.

"Well just visiting" Richard responded. Mikhael raised his eyebrow and laughed. Both of them knew no Westerner would ever just visit Moscow and vice versa.

"Look a famous scientist is here, also visiting, by the looks of it" he pointed to Karl Svensson who had just entered the restaurant.

"Of course, let's meet him. Surprising you know so much about Russian scientists" replied Mikhael, still skeptical and clearly perturbed by the scientist's entry.

Richard called Karl over and they shook hands.

"What a pleasure to run into you Mr. Richard, here in Moscow" said Karl.

"Oh the pleasure is all mine, Mr. Svensson, that you still remember me" Richard replied.

"You two know each other?" asked Mikhael, suspicious. How Richard knew a Russian scientist, he thought. It was not a coincidence.

"Well, a scientist doesn't have the luxury to forget much, Mr. Richard" said Karl.

“Well I’ll take your leave now gentlemen, have a fair bit of shopping to do on Masha’s request. You remember her Mikhael?” Richard asked.

“Of course, your daughter. A very bright individual indeed” Mikhael responded.

Richard left the restaurant, went some distance ahead and then came back. He saw the two men going towards the back of the restaurant. He followed them inside.

Inside, he found a maze of curtains and rooms. Karl and Mikhael went inside one of the rooms and shut the door.

Richard looked around for anyone who might interrupt them at that moment but found no one. He tried to look for windows or door creaks which might give him some insights into the ongoing conversations inside.

Just as he was about to give up, he saw a waiter approaching. Richard hid behind one of the curtains. He saw the waiter knocking and waiting for a response. The door cracked open just an inch, someone took the order from the waiter and shut the door on his face.

Richard heard a faint trickle of conversation during that time. “The high command has just refused it Karl, you might as well accept it” Richard was sure it was Mikhael.

So he had some level of confirmation that all these people were definitely involved in some conspiracy. And all this had something to do with Jack’s death.

He went out of the hotel, walked some distance along the road, took right and left turns at random and when he was sure nobody was following him, he called Ashton.

“What?” came Ashton’s irritated response.

“Busy?” responded Richard with surprise.

“No just going through some stuff. What’s up? Found anything” Ashton asked.

“Nothing concrete but I met Mikhael and Karl together” replied Richard.

“Alright then” replied Richard, excited. “Anything I should be excited or concerned about?” he asked.

Richard told him in detail what had happened.

“Ok so we have something to go on. They are definitely involved. Now, listen to me Richard. I didn’t want to say anything till I had something in had but now that we do, go meet Vladimir Vostok” said Ashton.

“Any new brother of the President we don’t know about?” asked Richard.

“Not now Richard. He is our double agent in the FSB. He needs to come in now and fill in the gaps with whatever he might know” replied Ashton.

“And why was asking him for help not the first thing on our to-do list?” replied Richard.

“This is because we cannot involve him and risk blowing his cover for every small hunch the West has. He is the only one we have in Russia for the time being Richard. Also, you will not contact him. I will send him a message and he will contact you in some way. Got it?” asked Ashton.

“Yes Boss” came Richard’s sarcastic reply and they disconnected the call.

Funny flying me all the way here when they already had an agent within the FSB, thought Richard.

CHAPTER 41

The next morning, there was tap on Richard's door at 6 AM.

"Do all Russians wake up so early or do I have to deal with all the morons of the lot" muttered Richard to himself.

He opened the door to find package addressed to him on the floor below. He looked around in the hallway but it was completely deserted. He took the package inside. It was covered with bright blue wrapping paper and a pin ribbon on top.

He cut open the ribbon ceremoniously and found a cardboard box inside. He opened the box to find another smaller box inside it. Irritated with this joke he opened the smaller box to find a white sheet of paper, addressed to him.

In capital letters, it said, MEET ME AT 12 AT THE RYBNIY BAZAR.

SIGNED: JOKER.

Richard knew it was the double agent trying to get in touch with him but had no idea spies were also so dramatic.

Who signs off the letter by joker, he thought.

He tossed the cardboard aside and kept the letter in his pocket for future references. You never know what to expect, especially in his profession.

He spent the day in his hotel room, brooding. A murder case blowing up into an international conspiracy was not

something he saw every day, despite being in the MI6. He was thinking about everything that had unfolded in the case till now and it was pretty interesting. Had someone else told him about anything like this happening, he would never have believed it, or believed it to be something straight out of a fantasy.

At precisely 11 o'clock, he left his hotel room and reached THE RYBNIY BAZAR. He had thought it to be a market. He had heard Indians call their markets by a similar name. But he found it to be pretty good restaurant.

He was unsure what to do here. Was he supposed to reserve a table or go around the plaza looking for the agent? What was it with spies and secret methods, he could never understand, despite being one for several years.

Richard waited patiently near the front door of the restaurant. A young girl selling flowers came up to him and held up a basket of flowers.

"These for you kind sir" she said in a heavily Russian-accented voice.

"They are as sweet and beautiful as you young princess. But I am waiting for someone here. Won't be able to hold onto it for long. Sorry?" replied Richard.

At the same instant his phone rang. He picked it up and before he could say anything the voice from the other side said "Take the flowers" and disconnected the call.

He thanked the little girl, who went hopping about her business, and looked inside the basket. Beneath the flowers, he saw a small note. Shaking his head, he took out the note and set the basket down.

Inside were the letters COME TO THE BACK OF THE RESTAURANT. SEE YOU THERE.

Shaking his head again, Richard went off to the back of the restaurant to find a man with a hoodie waiting for him. When the man removed his hoodie, Richard saw a bald man, roughly in his late thirties or early forties.

“So you are Vladimir Vostok?” enquired Richard.

“Well, as you would have seen, I prefer to be called the joker. But VV is fine” he replied.

“Sure. So you know the case?” Richard asked him.

“As much as I need to know. No need for additional details when not required right?” VV said.

Richard shrugged and nodded.

“So I have been doing some background checks on Karl Svensson and his ties with the Russian Government and the deep state. Those ties are definitely there and strong ones at that. This is the one thing I can say for sure. Now why the Russian Government involved in the killing of a child was the mystery I was looking into. And I think I might have found out why” he stopped.

“Go on” said Richard. Having a penchant for drama is something everyone wants, but few have it like VV, thought Richard.

“Well Jack being the curious kid that he was, wanted to know more about Karl Svensson’s theories. This led him to meet other people who were fascinated by this. Some of those people you have already met, right?” VV stopped just as a teacher stops in between a lesson to invite questions.

Richard simply nodded and waited. He was getting impatient, now that the case was reaching it's climax and VV was testing his patience to the limit.

"Right. So after this, Jack's curiosity increased. He went to Karl Svensson's office one night and checked out the potion prepared by him. He found that there was actually a chemical which could cause invisibility. He became fascinated but did not do something about it and went home" said VV.

"Well sorry to interrupt, how do you know all this?" asked Richard. "Were you following Jack? Because all these details could not have been known by anyone else right?" Richard asked.

"Well here's the catch Richard. I don't know if you are aware of how your British Government works but wherever there are important British individuals living abroad, and you can call Jack important because of his Ashton connection, there is always one MI6 detective taking care of his general well-being. Well, I was Jack's trail" replied VV.

"So if you were here the whole time and you knew everything, then why was I made in charge of this case?" asked Richard.

"If you must know, I was not here the whole time, Richard. I was away on an official business and when I came back, I received this shocking news about Jack. Jack's friends and neighbors knew me as Jack's distant uncle so they kept me informed about anything that happened to him. When I came back and enquired, they told me everything" said VV.

"But I spoke to his friends too. Nobody told me all this?" replied Richard, suspicious.

“Well, I guess, you do understand the difference between an uncle and the police right? And which one those will invoke fear and which of those will generate sympathy?” said VV.

“Ok so go on. Complete your story” said Richard.

“Right. So when Jack went home, he called his best friend, Max and told him everything. Now here is something you should know. Max is also a drug dealer and he worked for Karl Svensson as well, supplying him with you know what stuff. He immediately let Karl know that Max had discovered his potion” said VV.

“But this discovery would’ve made him famous right? So what made Karl Svensson kill Jack?” asked Richard.

“It would have, except it was not to be made public knowledge that invisibility exists because Russia wants to make something big out of it. The West has, through it’s spies, known for years, that Russia has something like this and is already developing counters for it. Russia maybe knows it maybe not, nobody can tell” came VV’s response.

“But now that we know this can’t we do anything about it? How do we bring Jack’s murderers to justice?” asked Richard.

“Well we certainly cannot let this rest but we also cannot make it an international issue. It would make the Russians more aware and possibly make them change directions. We need to catch them unawares’ replied VV.

“Ok so I have a plan. I can get Karl Svensson to confess but for the others I need your help?” replied Richard.

“Sure Richard. I’ll definitely help you. But one more thing. I’ll stay in touch with you when I have any information. Don’t try to contact me, nor should you involve Ashton in this

any further. It gets really covert after this. Understood?" asked VV.

"Absolutely. But you have to give me a valid reason to get Ashton off my back. You've dealt with him, you know how he gets when he doesn't have all the information" said Richard jokingly.

"Now you're telling me to do something that is more difficult than defeating the Russians" VV replied.

Both started laughing. Richard realized it will sometime before he would be laughing like this again. It would be only after the mission concludes.

CHAPTER 42

The next day, as expected, Ashton called Richard to know what progress he had made.

“Well, yeah I’ve met VV and we’ve discussed this” replied Richard. He had to keep Ashton off his back till he had something concrete. The British radio was only second to Ashton when it came to dispensing news.

“Okay so you’ve met him and?” Ashton was clearly waiting for a lengthier response.

“We’ve decided to keep a low profile and keep watch on them for the time being” replied Richard concisely.

“That’s it? You’ve decided to keep watch?” asked Ashton incredulously. He had known Richard for 20 years now and VV for 15. Both did not have a single calm bone in their bones and they were talking about waiting? There was clearly something they didn’t want Ashton to know.

“Fine” he said before Richard could think of anything convincing to say. “As long as both of you think it’s the right approach, it’s alright. I’ll support you”. Ashton wanted to add keep me informed but clearly there was no use for that now. He disconnected the call.

That was not so difficult, Richard thought. He called VV to tell him about the call.

“He clearly knows we’re up to something, Richard. He knows us better than ourselves and he knows we’re doing

something. He's just trusting us for the time being. Let's get on with our plan before this time runs out" both of them agreed to it and said goodbye.

CHAPTER 43

The next day Richard, still trying to process if Ashton had any idea what was happening or was he the one somehow involved in it, he thought it would be better if he found it out himself. He had to find out if he was being played by Ashton.

When he decided to wait and think about it, he realized various facts. Ashton was the first person to tell him about Max's disappearance. He was the one who guided him to VV. He was the one who told him about the scientist and his association with Max. All the important facts of the case came from Ashton and Richard had blindly trusted him.

He called VV. He picked the call on the third ring.

"Hey Richard. Found something?" VV asked.

"Not exactly. Just wanted to confirm something from you though. When did you first meet Ashton?"

"Around three years ago. He came to my place and told me he is a part of the government and will be contacting me on it's behalf whenever they require my assistance. I have been here a long time so I understand how these things work so I agreed. Why what's wrong?" VV asked.

"So you did not question him about his credentials or how he got your contact? Tell me how did you meet your previous representations?" Richard was curious now.

“Well, now that I think about it, normally I receive a briefing from my superiors about my next contact in the government. He was the first one to call me up directly. Others are too uptight to give a call themselves. He did so I was pretty happy at that time. But why are you asking me this now? Has something happened? Has Ashton said something to you? What is going on Richard, tell me?” VV was now raining questions at him, to which he had no answers but he shared his recent musings with him.

“Ok I understand. Maybe it’s the case taking a toll on your mental health? Because doubting Ashton at this stage should not happen Richard. We need to nab Jack’s culprit and we need to be practical” said VV seriously.

“I agree VV. But what if Ashton is the culprit? My hunch is rarely wrong so I tend to trust it. I am going to investigate it some more” replied Ashton.

VV had no response to it so he disconnected the call. Even though he had told Richard there was no reason to doubt Ashton, Richard’s questions had left a lingering doubt in his mind.

Could Richard be right? Has it really been Ashton all along?

CHAPTER 44

After talking to VV, Richard was sure Ashton had something to do with it. There was only one way to find out. He called Ashton.

“Hi Richard. Updates?” Ashton asked, when he picked up.

“Ashton, I have found Jack’s murderer. You should come here so that we can bring this case to a conclusion” replied Richard.

“Oh Ok. Can I have a name now or do you want a grand reveal?” asked Richard sarcastically.

“Well I would’ve preferred the second option but I will simply tell you the name of the culprit when you reach here” responded Richard in kind.

“Got it. Will be there in some time” said Ashton and disconnected.

Richard decided to play with it for a while to check Ashton’s responses. Only a slip on Ashton’s part can help me uncover the truth now.

Before meeting Ashton, Richard made two calls. He had a few doubts which he wanted to clarify before talking to Ashton.

“Hi Richard. All ok?” asked prosecution lawyer Jarvis when he picked up the call. He got a strange nagging feeling every time Richard gave him a call.

“Yes I am in a hurry at the moment. Just one question. Under what circumstances can immunity be granted to someone who testifies in court?” asked Richard.

“Alright. Look Richard, immunity is something which is given when there is direct threat to life of the witness or the person testifying in court. Immunity implies being safeguarded from life threats as there is witness protection and if anything happens to the witness the criminal can be imprisoned for years” responded Jarvis.

“Great. Thanks Jarvis. Will be in touch soon” said Richard and disconnected.

Jarvis looked at his phone. He prayed to all the Gods in all religions that he should not receive Richard’s call anytime soon.

Richard called up his long time contact Bert next. Even though Ashton did not want any of his contacts connecting without his knowledge. But even Ashton would agree that this was a special circumstance.

“Hi Richard. Whatsup? Ashton give you anything new?” asked Bert cheerfully.

How Richard wished he could keep up this cheerful mood but he knew he had to destroy it.

“Well yes he did Bert. In fact I wanted to ask you something about it. Can you talk now?” asked Richard. He had to do this tactfully otherwise he might lose his leverage.

“Sure what’s wrong?” asked Bert.

“Bert, Ashton had a godson, Jack who was murdered a few days back. I am investigating his death. Did you know about Jack or that Richard had a Godson?” asked Richard.

Bert did not answer for a full minute so Richard thought he had hung up. Then Bert started speaking.

“Yes Richard. Ashton had a Godson and for many years I was tasked with keeping tabs on him. Ashton wanted the slightest hint of activity he did” Bert said.

“But why? I mean why was he so concerned about him? Asked Richard, genuinely puzzled.

“He wanted to get him murdered, Richard” said Bert seriously.

“Ashton wanted him murdered? But why? And then why did he ask me to investigate the case?” Richard was truly shocked now.

“I am not the why guy Richard. I am only the what guy. There is one more thing though” said Bert, but he stopped short of mentioning it.

“What is it Bert?” asked Richard, impatiently.

“I will tell you but I need complete immunity and witness protection, Richard. This can put my life in danger if Ashton decides he wants revenge” replied Bert.

Richard smiled, grateful that he had just had the required discussion with the prosecutor.

“Yes Ok Bert. I have already spoken to the prosecutor and he said immunity can be given. So continue please” he said.

“Alright, good. The thing is Richard, Ashton ordered me to take a hit at Jack and even offered \$15million to do this” concluded Bert.

“What? He offered such a huge sum of money to kill Jack?” asked Richard, astonished.

“Yes he did. He even offered to fly me out of the country and get me settled in any other part of the world. But I refused to do it. How could I get involved in a child’s murder? And since that incident, he has not been in touch with me” replied Bert.

Ashton felt the pieces of this mystery puzzle fitting into place and he thought the case was entering the last phase.

“Thanks a lot Bert. You have been a great help. I will be in touch. Goodbye” said Richard.

“Goodbye Richard. Hope you conclude the case soon” said Bert and disconnected. Now it was Richard’s turn to stare at his phone and he did so for almost two minutes.

Richard took a deep breath and left to meet Ashton. The final showdown was about to begin.

CHAPTER 45

Ashton met Richard at three o'clock in the afternoon at his hotel. Richard could tell he had rushed in a hurry but Ashton's guilt was yet to be proven.

"So? Go on. Tell me. Who is Jack's murderer?" asked Ashton impatiently.

"Wow pretty direct huh. No 'How have you been Richard?' 'Have you been busy Richard?'"

"Look I know this was a tedious mission and I sent you on it. Now give me a name so that you can get out of this quickly and leave the rest to me" quipped Ashton.

"Well now that I have been a part of this for so long, I think I will see it to the end. You know I have never left a case incomplete" came Richard's response.

"Fine whatever. Name please?" Ashton was starting to lose control.

"Fine. Since you wanted me to have a grand reveal, I will tell you the name" said Richard sarcastically. "It's you Ashton. It has been you all along" came Richard's reveal and with it, Ashton's anger.

"Are you out of your mind Richard? Me? I sent you to find the murderer and you're turning this on me?" said Richard, incredulous.

"Am I wrong Ashton?" asked Richard, using the voice he had reserved for the most serious criminals over the years.

“Don’t you use your detective voice with me Richard! You know I am well aware of it” said Ashton haughtily. “I have not murdered Jack. Why will I murder my own godson? I told you everything dammit” Ashton had completely lost his temper now.

“Well I agree you told me everything. But everything that you thought was relevant for a police investigation. The planning for this has been going on for quite a few years now has it not? Or should I say precisely three years, when VV was hired?” said Richard.

CHAPTER 46

“What are you saying Richard? Absolutely not. And do you have any proof of all the allegations you’re making?” enquired Ashton.

“Oh absolutely. But first let me tell you why I think you’re the one. Let me start with the most recent example. Interestingly I found out that you bypassed all rules and regulations to get VV selected for his position. Is it not true?” asked Richard.

“No you are not wrong Richard. I did hire VV and I had to bypass a few rules to get him hired but that was only because he was qualified for it” replied Ashton.

“Sure sure you had to hire him because he was qualified. And what about the scientist whom you sent us to investigate? Karl Svensson?” asked Richard.

“What about him? It was logical to investigate him wasn’t it? It was his theory that Jack disproved. You thought so too didn’t you?” came Richard’s counter question.

“Of course I did. Because I led to believe that. By you. Great now let’s come to what actually happened” said Richard.

“Sure. What do you think actually happened Richard? Let’s hear it?” Ashton responded.

“Well I think you set this all up. Let’s start from the beginning. Based on the story that you told me about your

relationship with Jack, he was your godson. But at the same time that story said something different. You were clearly in love with Jack's mom. You pretended to be happy for Jack but you were not. You were seething inside because you could not marry her" began Richard.

"Let's assume you're right. So what? Even if I had loved Jack's mother, that does not make me a criminal. Why will murder him?" said Ashton indignantly.

Richard had a feeling he was about to be proven right. Ashton losing his temper was proof he had something to do with it. Not inconclusive proof but he could feel an itch creeping up his spine. That itch of nervousness. That itch of concluding a case.

"Absolutely not Ashton. I am an investigator. I do not base my conclusions on incomplete love affairs. This was bigger" said Richard.

"What?" asked Ashton curiously.

"You might not mention it but VV did. Before you met him and gave him his contract, the person employed before him quit. He was found in a drain and when he recovered he lost his left leg completely" Richard tried a different approach.

"Well yes he did. That's why I had to replace him" said Ashton.

"So I spoke to him the other day. He said you have been keeping surveillance on Jack since he was a kid. You wanted to keep track of everything happening there" said Richard calmly.

"Keeping track of my godson to keep him safe does not mean I was his murderer" said Ashton, almost shouting now.

“Of course not. Keeping track does not mean murder but paying someone for murder does” said Richard calmly.

“What do you mean?” asked Ashton suspiciously.

“What I mean is I spoke to VV and he said you have another contact here you did not tell me about. Isn’t that right?” asked Richard, trying to gauge Ashton’s reaction.

“Well, yes I have contacts all over the world. Now do I need to give you a list of my contacts so that you stop suspecting me for my own godson’s murder?” Ashton was getting frustrated. Richard knew this was the only time he could get Ashton to confess.

“Absolutely not. Because I did that myself and I did one better. I spoke to that contact of yours too” said Richard calmly.

CHAPTER 47

“What? You know that is a breach of rules Richard. You are only supposed to connect with the contact I tell you to speak to” Ashton was fuming.

“Of course I do but there are no rules prohibiting two unknown strangers from having a coffee together, are there?” asked Richard, innocently.

Ashton was seething and staring at Richard, as if willing him to vaporize with his gaze.

“So, continuing, I met Bert and asked him about his assignment. Of course I had to share some of mine but since I hadn’t made any progress by then, information was scarce from my end” said Richard.

“Okay so what information did he give you?” asked Ashton tentatively.

“Oh he was very talkative. He gave me the valuable information of you giving him money to take a hit at your own Godson. And I must tell you even I was impressed by the sum of \$15million. Could’ve given it to me, just saying” said Richard.

“He is clearly lying Richard. You think I have \$15million to order a hit?” said Ashton.

“Of course you did. I did not get to this point in my career by finding out half- truths Ashton. I investigated the recent \$500million deal you signed with the United States Defense

department to procure fighter jets. You think this was a clean slate?" asked Richard.

Ashton was shocked at this.

"How did you know about this Richard?" Ashton asked.

"So it is true" said Richard, as a matter of fact.

"The part about the deal is true and I accept it but the fact about ordering the hit, I will not accept it" said Ashton sternly.

"Alright. So the proof that I have will now be presented directly to court" said Richard.

"What proof?" asked Ashton.

"Bert is willing to testify anywhere I ask him to" replied Richard calmly.

"But why is Bert willing to testify? What did you offer him Richard?" asked Ashton suspiciously.

"The same thing which is offered to everyone before they agree to testify. Catch up Ashton. Immunity. You know I am very good at convincing people" replied Richard, slyly.

"Oh I can imagine" murmured Ashton. "But Richard, you know you cannot offer immunity on your own account. It's not up to you. The prosecutor needs to agree to that. I am also a Mayor you cannot fool me like that" replied Ashton seriously.

"Oh yes I am well aware of all these legalities Mayor. You think you are the only one with secret contacts. I have already spoken to the prosecutor and he has assured me that immunity is something that can be given in this case. Well considering he is my childhood friend, this was no big deal for him"

replied Richard, waiting for any other argument that Ashton might present to him.

But Ashton appeared positively deflated by these arguments and had no more up his sleeve.

The final confession came in this way.

CHAPTER 48

“**A**lright Richard” sighed Ashton. “You’ve won. It was me. I killed my own godson. I know I am a terrible human being but what was I supposed to do” he said, falling to the ground, sobbing.

Seeing him like this with his head in his hands made Richard feel sorry for him.

“I had this feeling the moment I handed the case over to you that you would uncover the truth and maybe on some level, I wanted the truth to be found. I wanted to be found out as a criminal” said Ashton, howling now.

Richard knew better than to interrupt so he kept his calm and waited for Ashton to finish.

“When Jack contacted me that he wanted me to ask the famed Karl Svensson to give his research a chance, I was delighted that he was taking an interest in something which can be revolutionary. But there was a catch” he continued.

“What catch?” asked Richard, sensing he was expected to do this.

“Jack was doing all this for profit. He was recruited by an organization linked to the ISIS” revealed Ashton.

“Your godson was a terrorist?” asked Richard, shocked.

“He was not a terrorist Richard, come on. He just didn’t know what the organization did. He was recruited saying it was a scientific research company and his revelations would

be able to revolutionize the world of science” Ashton continued.

“Then how did you know it was linked to the ISIS and was not really a scientific research company?” asked Richard, genuinely curious now.

This is taking an unexpected turn, he thought.

“Being a part of the Government has it’s advantages, Richard so when I got to know about this organization, I hired people who, in other words, had resources to find out more about it. I asked them to get me everything they could about the firm hiring Jack. And honestly, it was just to ensure his safety back then. It is common knowledge that Jack is close to me. He could have been harmed to get back at me. I just couldn’t risk it” said Ashton.

“Ok so you found out through your sources that Jack was hired by an organization which worked as a front for terrorists. So rather than getting them eliminated, you get your godson killed?” asked Richard, incredulous.

“No absolutely not. I loved him deeply Richard. I did not want him to be a part of an organization which was a terrorist front so I asked him to leave it and move to Kansas, where I had already secured a job for him” Ashton paused.

“That does not seem so bad” commented Richard.

“It wasn’t. But Jack was adamant. He felt this was the job he wanted to do because it was right where he wanted to work. When he started working, initially I doubted my own intelligence seeing he was not influenced at all but was really excited about the work he was getting to do there. Then came trouble” said Ashton.

Richard waited for him to continue.

“One day he came to me saying his company was sending him to Iraq for the induction process” Ashton finished.

“What induction?” asked Richard, suspicious.

“God knows Richard. I tried asking him but due to the previous disagreements that we had, he was reluctant to share his information with me” Ashton said, clearly distraught now.

“Okay so to prevent him from going to Syria, you had to kill him?” asked Richard, getting impatient now. He was used to long confessions but he doubted any of this was relevant to the murder at hand.

And honestly, he was just sleepy by now.

“Not exactly. I had to kill him because he was getting influenced by their ideologies and wanted to engage” Ashton replied.

“Engage?” asked Richard.

“Engage in killing innocent people Richard. He was given his first assignment and he had to find shooting targets. I understood by shooting targets, most probably they meant targets in a busy area or a market” Ashton said.

“And I was right, Richard” Ashton continued. “Their target for shooting practice was the Shorja market in Baghdad. It is the biggest and the oldest market place there. I tried convincing Jack to not go but he was adamant. I understood that he was too far gone. I had no other option, Richard” said Ashton, his eyes desperate and pleading.

“I understand Ashton. But I am still unable to understand, why kill him?” asked Richard.

“I could not get him arrested Richard. The world knows he was my godson and if it ever came out that he was

associated with a terrorist organization, it would mean my expulsion from the Parliament, not to mention, I might even be asked to leave the country. I could not risk it" replied Ashton.

"Well that is true" conceded Richard, still unconvinced.

"And even if I had not killed Jack and left the country for his sake, do you think our country or Iraq or even the US would've left him alone and not hunted him down and killed him? That is inconceivable right? At least what I did spared him the humiliation of being identified and labelled a terrorist with the other members of the organization" said Ashton.

"Agreed this way you make him a martyr but yourself a criminal. Why risk it? And why come to me? You knew I'll find you right?" asked Richard, quizzically.

"Yes I did. And I wanted you to find me, as I said earlier. I knew you were the only person who could find me. I knew you had the contacts and could easily manipulate anyone into giving you the information that you need and I must say I am impressed that you did it. This gives me redemption, Richard" concluded Ashton.

"One thing though. Why lead me to Russia and all the spying on the Russian spy chief? Why do that?" asked Richard.

"That was important Richard. Just not from the point of view of this case, but for our National security. I am still a part of this country's politics remember. The Russians have been planning a hit like this for really long now and this case gave me the opportunity to get you to investigate that too. Two birds from one stone, if you will" replied Ashton.

“I must say for the first time in my long career I am speechless Ashton. You know I will have to arrest you and you will have to face trial right? Are you sure you do not want to use your privileges as a Mayor?” asked Richard.

He did not want Ashton to use his privileges since that would be a breach of public trust, but since it was his duty, he had to ask.

“No, I will stand trial Richard. Even though I wanted to save Jack, it was still a murder. It is only fair that Jack should get justice” said Ashton.

EPILOGUE

Richard sat in the front row in court when the final prosecution arguments were being delivered.

Ashton was being painted as a cold blooded murderer was making an excuse to cover up the murder of his godson. He was portrayed as jealous and full of vengeance.

Ashton, or Mayor Ashton as he was being repeatedly addressed, sat with no expression on his face. He was staring straight ahead as if in some other world.

Richard occasionally stole glances at the jury and became increasingly sure that Ashton was in for the long haul.

After the closing arguments concluded, the judge sent the jury outside to the deliberation room.

While the jury deliberated, Richard sidled up next to Ashton.

"Are you ok?" asked Richard. "Fine" replied Ashton, not looking at Richard but continuing to stare straight ahead.

"The jury is not looking good" commented Richard.

"Yeah. But you know what it certainly feels lighter for it to be all out" responded Ashton, a smirk on his face.

"The jury has reached a verdict" came the announcement from the foreman when the court reassembled after the jury deliberations.

"Give me the verdict" ordered the judge.

The foreman handed a small slip of paper to the judge. The judge read the slip and began announcing the verdict.

"The jury has found Mayor Ashton guilty on account of murder and attempt to murder of Jack and he has been sentenced to ten years of rigorous imprisonment" concluded the sentencing.

Ashton smiled and got up with the rest of the courtroom as the judge left. He walked up to Richard and said "Thanks for solving it Richard. You are a true agent of the MI6. Jack got justice because of you."

"Before you go, I have a question Ashton" asked Richard.

Ashton smiled, "Fire away detective" he said.

"Why were there no fingerprints on the weapon? The forensic examination concluded the weapon had not been touched for at least a week. How is that possible?" asked Richard, unable to hide his surprise.

"Oh that, Yes, I will tell you how. I believe you're aware of isopropyl alcohol which is used to wipe fingerprints. I used that along with a special variety of gloves. When both these varieties combine, nobody can find fingerprints on anything. I have a friend who is an expert in these. He helped me get hold of them" replied Ashton.

Richard nodded. He had known Ashton for many years now, but he doubted it now.

Ashton smiled and patted Richard on his arm. "Good luck Richard. I made mistakes and should go and atone now."

"Not a mistake. Murder is a crime Ashton. Good luck" Richard shook his hand and left the courtroom.

He called Mark on his way out.

“How was it captain?” asked Mark.

“Well sometimes you need to believe that justice delayed is not justice denied” replied Richard.

He disconnected and went out to the canteen to find his favorite decaf and a cinnamon bun.