

# ONE

At any given moment there are about two hundred thousand fugitives from American justice and about forty thousand fugitives from Her Majesty's justice running free in the world. Two of those fugitives, one from each nation, were within fifty yards of each other on the beach a bit north of Paphos, on the Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus.

One was about to die. The other was not.

I was the 'not.'

I wasn't strictly on the beach, rather I was on a stool beside the tiki bar drinking Keo, the execrable local beer, and wondering if the immediate vicinity was sufficiently sparsely-populated that I could light a cigar without causing a riot. Cypriots probably wouldn't care, but this was not a Cypriot beach, it was a tourist and expat beach. The Paphos region at the extreme western edge of Cyprus is home to thousands of expats, mostly Brits, but with Russians, Germans, Israelis, Lebanese, various Balkan types, Scandinavians and the occasional American thrown in for good measure.

The British fugitive, the one who was about to be subtracted, was a woman, perhaps forty-five, with forgettable brown hair and shoulders that glowed faintly pink, suggesting a failure of

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sunblock. She lay on a blue-and-white-striped canvas chaise longue, facing the sea, her back to me. Her chaise was tilted at just the right angle to aim her cleavage in my general direction, though I doubt it was intentional, but as I had already seen a fair bit of the Mediterranean, and all of the beach, and there was nothing more compelling presenting itself, I spent some time contemplating those sunburned swells.

She was not on sand – there are precious few sand beaches on Cyprus, and the Turks have the best of them – but on the grass just before the sea wall which left her two or three feet above the narrow, pebbly strand below. Her chaise was in a row of identical chairs and she was reading a book on actual paper. A bottle of local white wine – rather better than the beer – rested in a bucket at her elbow. Like approximately all women over the age of bikini, she wore a broad straw hat and whenever she looked up, the back of her hat came down and blocked my view. When she looked back down at the book, I saw plump pink breasts and a blue one-piece bathing suit and legs that probably looked better without perspective turning them into tapers ending in tiny sandals.

‘Peek-a-boob,’ I said to Theodoros, the barman, as the hat brim lifted again.

Theodoros – twenty-something, dark bed head, dark bedroom eyes, with competent but accented English and a degree in chemistry – stopped polishing a glass and stared at me.

I grinned at him. ‘See, it’s peek-a-boob because—’

‘I understand, Mr Mitre. I’m just not going to encourage you with a phony laugh.’

I couldn’t see the book the woman was reading, but my

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few needy glimpses of the cover assured me that it was not one of mine. I write. Now. Didn't always write, but now I write and have produced five reasonably well-received, and moderately successful – or perhaps not entirely *unsuccessful* – mystery novels, all set in the city of New Midlands, a fictional locale located almost exactly where you'd find Chicago. New Midlands: Chicago, but with far more rich and attractive people committing far more complex and fascinating crimes than actual criminals have the energy, imagination or resources to pull off.

'I've heard you phony-laugh for customers before, Theo,' I said.

'My contempt for that particular . . . *jape* . . . is evidence of my underlying respect for you, Mr Mitre.'

I liked Theodoros because he spoke English well enough to get a joke. Everyone on Cyprus speaks English, or thinks they do, but Greek to English is a big leap and few manage it. There aren't many bartenders who can drop *jape* into conversation.

'Well, grab me another beer, Theo, and I'll come up with a more sophisticated witticism.'

My name is David Mitre, at present. I've gone through a few names, including the insufferable 'Carter Cannon,' which was ridiculous, like a superhero's alliterative secret identity. I've also been Martin, Alex, Frank, Thomas, Michael and now, David. The David Mitre Wikipedia page uses the word 'reclusive' three times. There's an author headshot but it doesn't take much Google-fu to discover that it's a stock photo. The model looks a bit like me, but not really. For one thing, Mr Stock Photo grows a much more convincing beard than I could ever manage;

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I stay clean-shaven. Mr Stock Photo also doesn't quite capture the subtle fight-or-flight paranoia that radiates from me.

Here is why I kept focusing on the woman with the cleavage: because of the way she was looking around. People generally do look around a bit when they're on a pleasant green verge beside sparkling water, but there are different ways of doing it. A person waiting on someone will look and then check their watch or phone. A person enjoying scenery will let their gaze wander, left, right, up, right again, maybe whip out that phone for a picture. But she wasn't looking for a waiter – she had barely touched her wine. And she wasn't looking for a toilet, she'd gone ten minutes earlier.

Ms Cleavage – probably not her real name – was looking around in a more methodical way. She would read her book for almost exactly two minutes, then scan left to right. All the way left, all the way right.

If I were a character in my own fiction, I might claim to have pulled a Sherlock and immediately deduced that she was one of the fugitive tribe in which I hold membership. But that would be stretching a point. I was looking at her because something about the way she scanned the world around her bothered me, and I have no better explanation than that. Just something off.

I didn't really sense anything unusual was about to happen until I caught sight of the waiter, entering stage left.

I, too, look around more than strictly necessary. I had discovered Fugitive Vision soon after jumping bail in Reno, Nevada nineteen years ago. How we look at the world – physically, not metaphorically – is very much a matter of culture, and westerners tend to focus about ten to twenty yards out, occasionally widening

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to take in context, but mostly folks look to recognize a face, a face that is in their immediate vicinity. Fugitive Vision pushes out further so you focus about a hundred yards out, looking for faces the instant they are close enough to be recognized. Like submarine warfare, it's all about seeing before you are seen.

The waiter was a black African, Somali maybe, presumably one of the luckier refugees to come ashore in this refugee-besieged nation, and had caught my eye not because he was anyone who might recognize me but because of the way he moved. Among the many jobs I've held in my forty-something years is waiter. I know how waiters move and it wasn't like this. The waiter had a drinks tray on his left palm – so far so good – but he steadied the wine bottle upon it with his right hand. And the bottle itself was positioned toward the edge. The outer edge. Which, as any half-bright server would know, was madness. Or at least awkwardness.

There are two ways for a waiter to carry a wine bottle: in the center of the tray, or in his hand with the tray folded under his arm.

Then there was the way he walked, loping, swaying a bit, side to side. Watch a waiter move sometime: it's left in front of right in front of left. And there will be a swivel to the hips useful for cutting close to tables and chairs. This guy moved like Jar-Jar Binks, or the guy from the Grateful Dead "Truckin'" logo. No wonder he couldn't balance a bottle.

An impressive yacht, practically a pocket-sized cruise ship glided by like an iceberg passing by on a conveyor belt. Tan young women in small bathing suits waved at us. Theodoros brought me the beer.

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'You've got to start stocking better beer, Theo.'

'I have Peroni.'

'Like I said.'

Ms Cleavage looked up as the vendor's shadow fell over her. I saw her shake her head, 'no, not for me,' and return her gaze to the book.

The waiter knelt, set the tray carefully on the grass and reached into his pocket for his wine opener.

Then I saw the knife.

It was a serious knife with a double-edged, seven-inch, blued blade. This was not a pocketknife or something lifted from the kitchen, this was a professional's tool. The vendor bent over Ms Cleavage, too close, as though he was speaking to her in a whisper. She looked up again, annoyed now. I caught a glimpse of her face reflected in his mirrored shades.

He slapped his left hand over her mouth. His right hand went behind the chaise longue and stabbed the blade right through the blue-and-white-striped canvas.

The blade entered around what I guessed would be the *latis-simus dorsi*. He worked the knife inside her, pushing down on the leather-wrapped handle to lever the blade upward and slice into her lungs, then pulling upward, muscles straining, to force the tip down toward her liver. Then he twisted the knife in place, widening the entry wound. This all took maybe four seconds.

The woman jerked. Spasmed. And again. And a kick that sent one sandal flying.

But it was over quickly. The African might not be much use as a waiter but he knew his business with a knife.

Despite his twisting, he had to get his body weight into the

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job of pulling the knife out and when he did blood gushed from the tear in the fabric, splashing red on the grass. Christmas colors, red and green.

I shot a look at Theodoros. He had not seen. No one had, not yet.

I got up from my stool, beer in hand, said, 'Put it on my tab, I have an appointment.'

Theodoros nodded, preoccupied with new customers, and I walked directly away, up toward the resort hotel. I was on the terrace when the first scream rose behind me. I put on a frown and looked around in a perfunctory, befuddled sort of way for the benefit of any possible cameras, shrugged and went on through to the hotel's lower level, up the stairs to the main lobby and out to my car.

I got in and drove away, keeping to the speed limit not for fear of traffic cops but because it's hard to concentrate when you're shaking and fighting the urge to vomit.

When the killer had pulled the knife out it was like slicing a wineskin. That was not a memory I wished to savor, but imagination – so very useful in my current profession as writer – now supplied lurid and detailed mental images of internal organs crudely butchered. I'd been too far away to hear anything but a slight gasp, but ever-helpful imagination provided sound effects of cleavers on rump roasts.

I have not lived a sheltered life. I've seen people in the act of being killed. It's not a good thing to see, but I had more immediate issues to deal with. There's the old line from *Casablanca*. 'Round up the usual suspects.' It doesn't matter what the crime is, a fugitive is automatically a 'usual suspect' and my passport,

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which passed muster at border crossings, could start raising red flags if cops really started looking.

So, I drove off, congratulating myself on quick thinking, regretting only the excuse I had given. An *appointment*? That could come back to haunt me.

When I got back to my rented hillside villa I poured myself half a tumbler of Talisker and drank it down as my nerves jumped and twitched.

We all see murders on TV and in movies or read about it in books; it's a very different thing when you see it in real life. There is a terrible wrongness to it, something you feel in your soul – if you believe in such things as souls.

I told myself it was someone else's tragedy, not mine. I reminded myself that I am not superstitious and that it was in no way an omen or a warning. I told myself it really didn't matter and had nothing at all to do with me.

And it didn't. Until it did.



## TWO

My rented villa had come with an unexpected nuisance: the lower floor was rented separately. I had learned this only upon moving in and my landlady, Dame Stella Weedon, a Brit expat, tried to la-di-da it away as some sort of local custom. But the reality was more sinister. There was a movie shooting on the island, a rom-com of some sort involving George Selkirk, then fifty-one years old, and an unknown French actress half his age named Minette. Just Minette. In the world of clickbait, they were known as Kirkette because the alternatives were Morge, Selette and Georgette.

The downstairs renter was not Minette or George, let alone Kirkette; the downstairs renter was Chante Mokrani. Chante – pronounced ‘shont’ unless you wanted her to punch you in the neck – was personal assistant to Minette, and Dame Stella would have given her last sleeve of Hobnobs to get either part or all of Kirkette to attend one of her frequent parties.

My first encounter with Chante had come when I marched downstairs to ask her to turn down her music.

‘Hi. I’m the guy who lives upstairs,’ I said by way of introduction.

My first impression of her was that her first impression of

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me was unfavorable. It was dislike at first sight. She disliked everything about me, every detail, as she looked me up and down and back up again. It wasn't actual hate, it was more a sort of disappointment, as if I was the birthday present she really did not want or a dish she had not ordered.

This was disturbing to me. I'm a good-looking guy. I'm not George Selkirk, maybe, but women simply do not turn their noses up at me on first sight. Usually they don't actively dislike me until I've emptied one or more of their bank accounts. Sometimes not even then.

'Yes?' Chante Mokrani said.

'The music. I was wondering if you could turn it down.'

'Why?'

'Why?'

'Yes. Why?'

So, right away I knew she wasn't British. A Brit would have apologized and turned it off entirely. He would have called me a wanker as soon as I was out of earshot, but first he'd have turned it off.

Chante was on the elfin side, not tall, with stylishly-cut, vaguely punkish black hair, several piercings, moderate gauges in her ears, angry dark eyes and a thin-lipped mouth which did not raise expectations of warm smiles.

'Because it is very loud,' I explained. I added hand gestures, pointing at my ears with both index fingers.

She shook her head. 'No, it is not very loud. It is fado, not rock music. Fado.'

'Yes, I know it's fado—'

'Tânia Oleiro.'

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'I'm just not that crazy about Portuguese blues cranked up to eleven.'

That made her blink. She had not expected me to recognize fado, the mournful Portuguese version of blues, full of lost loves and, presumably, complaints about Spaniards.

'It is not the volume you complain of,' she said with a French accent. 'It is that it makes you sad.'

Normally at that point, confronting a not-yet-charmed woman commenting on my emotional state, I'd have tried still harder to charm her, perhaps charm her into bed. But I had at least fifteen years on her and she was very far from finding me tolerable, let alone charming.

'What if I don't wish to be sad?' I said, adding a *so-there* smile.

'Ah,' Chante said, nodded wisely. And closed the door.

And left the music playing at volume.

The second time I'd run into her had been in my kitchen. I had come stumbling down out of my bedroom at the ungodly hour of ten in the morning wearing nothing but underpants and found her going through my cupboards.

'What the hell?' I had demanded with regrettable lack of originality.

'Birthday candles. Do you have any birthday candles?'

'What in the holy fuck would I be doing with birthday candles?'

'Minette wishes to have a birthday party for Amadou.'

My raised eyebrow elicited the explanation:

'Amadou is her dog.'

'Of course it is. How did you get in?'

'Both doors have the same key,' she explained. Not even a

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hint of defensiveness mind you, no consciousness of guilt. If I pulled that sort of . . . Well, I *had* pulled that sort of thing many times actually, but not recently.

The third meeting happened the morning after the murder. Once again I stumbled down the stairs from my bedroom, aiming like a wobbly missile toward the coffee maker, when I found her in my kitchen.

‘Jesus Christ. What, more candles for your movie star’s dog?’

‘Only an egg. You have no eggs?’

‘I have eggs in the fridge.’

‘But why would you put eggs in a refrigerator?’

‘It’s how we do things in America,’ I said and pushed the start button on the coffee machine. ‘What do you need an egg for?’

‘I am making a piperade.’

This was my chance to once again display my erudition and basically stun her into admiration. ‘What are you doing for espelette peppers?’

Oh yeah: that stopped her. She withdrew from the refrigerator holding a carton of six eggs and stared at me with dark, distrustful eyes. ‘Aleppo peppers. You can find them in the farmer’s markets.’

‘Piperade with eggs.’ I nodded reluctant approval. It was acceptable. In fact it sounded good, and I suspected would sound even better once I had my coffee. ‘Is that for your movie star?’

‘Minette has no scenes today. She is spending the day with a friend.’

‘Friend, huh? That sounds like juicy Hollywood gossip.’

‘Do you like such gossip?’ Her English was very good, but still *goh-SEEP* sounded cutely French.

‘The very act of telling you how little I care about Hollywood

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gossip exhausts my entire year's allowance of interest in Hollywood gossip.'

She took that on-board. She had a habit of looking away when she was thinking, like she wasn't looking at you, but at your shadow. It wasn't a stare into emptiness, it was as if she saw someone standing immediately behind you, peeking over your shoulder. She focused on that visual echo.

'Ah,' she said, then nodded, turned and walked off with my eggs. 'Agenda item,' I muttered. 'Chain lock. Or a Rottweiler.'

I poured coffee and carried it and my laptop out onto the patio. The sun was up, the Mediterranean was sparkling and dotted with happy sailboats, the coffee was hot and bitter, and aside from the fact that I'd been thirty feet from a grisly murder the day before, all was right with the world.

I have a morning routine that involves signing onto a VPN, opening an incognito window in my browser and googling my aliases, filtering for the previous twenty-four hours.

Nothing. There never was. Still . . .

I closed the incognito window and went to Goodreads to obsessively read the most recent reviews of my books. This was accompanied by grunts of approval or angry snorts of dismissal.

'Go get eating utensils, hurry while it is hot!'

I spun around, guilty, and closed my laptop like I'd been looking at porn. Chante had three plates balanced on her left arm like a diner waitress, two dishes of spicy red piperade with an egg coddled in the middle, still cooking from the heat. The third plate was toast.

I really saw no alternative to getting silverware. Also napkins, marmalade, butter and salt.

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I sat facing the prime view, Chante took the chair to my right and turned it halfway, either to see the water or avoid seeing me.

I pierced the eggs and let the yolk spread creamy goodness. I took a bite. Cocked an eyebrow at her. Took another bite.

‘This is actually good.’

‘Yes.’

‘You cook.’

‘*Évidemment*,’ she said, which is French for ‘duh.’

‘No, I mean you *cook*. The dish is perfectly seasoned, the presentation is professional, no dribbles or greasy thumbprints on the plate. The egg isn’t off by twenty seconds either way, so you may have actually taken into account how much it would continue cooking as you carried the plates up here.’

She briefly made eye contact before explaining to my shadow, ‘I have had some training.’

‘You cook for what’s her name?’

‘I do many things for Minette. I am her assistant.’ She betrayed a hint of pride.

I nodded. ‘Cool.’ We ate and then sat back and relaxed until it was clear that in this relationship I was the busboy. I cleared dishes and brought us both fresh coffees.

‘Will you write now?’ Chante asked.

I frowned. ‘You know who I am?’

‘I know that you are a writer. Madame Stella told me. She said you would be quiet.’

‘I don’t suppose you’ve read any . . .’

Her look was either pitying or contemptuous, somewhere on that scale. ‘I do not read popular books.’

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Great. She was a snob. A French snob, no less, and no one can touch a French snob, it goes deep with them, especially as regards food or literature. Or language. Or clothing. Art. Architecture. Philosophy. Almost anything, really.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not that popular,’ I said with acid sarcasm.

‘No,’ she agreed. Like she had checked my BookScan numbers.

Yeah, well, my latest barely missed the *New York Times* list, I’m outselling most of Elmore Leonard’s backlist, and I was shortlisted for an Edgar, so fuck you. I did not say.

She stood up. ‘You can leave the plates on the little table beside my door,’ she said. ‘I must go to the market. Is there anything I can bring you?’

‘Eggs,’ I said. ‘Someone took mine.’

‘And the money?’

Had I been the violent as opposed to the nonviolent sort of ex-criminal, that’s when I would have strangled her. I fished out a twenty-euro note. ‘Bring me the change.’

When she was gone, I spent some time looking up coverage of the murder on the beach on several English language Cyprus news sites, as well as Google-translated Greek language sites.

The consensus was clear: murder was bad. Murdering a foreign tourist was arguably worse (though the Greek language papers were less convinced of that).

Police were releasing no details, but had issued an official statement which read in part, ‘Haven’t got a fucking clue.’ Or words to that effect.

I read the comments sections because they’re often a better insight into attitudes and you get information that doesn’t quite rise to the publishable level. In this case, the killer was black,

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therefore obviously an immigrant or refugee and, well, shrug, that's what happened when you let in people who were not Greek. So sorry for all those refugees, but we can't very well have them stabbing tourists. Some comments pointed to the murder of an expat nine months earlier and suggested that a wave of expat-related murder was sweeping the island nation, which might well lead to a panicked exodus of expats and there goes the real-estate market.

All fine by me, I was in Cyprus but not permanently, I had a one-year lease with eleven months to go. So, if a woman being stabbed to death in Paphos was an excuse to shrug and blame nonwhite outsiders – deplorable, certainly – but all the better for me: the less hue and cry the less likelihood of me being dragged into it.

I opened the travel article I was supposed to be writing for *GQ* magazine, reminded myself of where I'd left off and what I needed to write next, and got down to it, convinced that I was as safe as ever I could be.



## THREE

‘Mr Mitre, I am so glad you could come!’

‘David, please, and I wouldn’t miss it. I was honored to be invited.’

Not true. Left to my own preferences I would not have attended the party, but if I meant to blend in rather than attract attention, I had to curb my misanthropy. If you don’t meet people when you move somewhere new, you don’t know who to toady, who to ignore, who to keep an eye on and most importantly, who to bribe.

So, when Dame Stella Weedon, along with her dotard husband, Sir Archibald Weedon, had invited me to a soiree at her much larger villa and made it clear in that politely insistent way that the British do so well that I was expected to show up and play the part of the largely obscure visiting author in her cast of partiers, I agreed.

Dame Stella was just the sort of woman I’d have aimed my charm at back in the old days. She had family money of some sort and was not at all bad-looking, a very well-preserved fifty or maybe fifty-two, so not ridiculously older than I. She had expensively blonde hair, a forehead Botoxed to marble, and the tanned and well-displayed legs of a younger woman. She wore

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an overly-vivid floral pattern dress, which was the second thing I noticed after the white gold-and-diamond necklace that must have made someone at De Beers happy. I ballparked it at about seventy-five grand USD. A fence might get forty, meaning I'd clear a good twenty, twenty-five. And the necklace almost certainly had brothers and sisters in an easily-popped safe.

Not that I was . . . But you have to *look*. Looking is not illegal.

Introductions followed, variations on 'Instantly-forgettable person? I'd like you to meet David Mitre, the mystery novelist you've never heard of but now have to pretend to be a fan of.'

They were happy, they were charmed, they were excited, they were indifferent. I matched one of those emotions, but I'm a capable enough actor to appear interested, so we all got along just fine, chatting about wine and food and whether British Airways would add a flight from Paphos to Gatwick, which led to complaints about air travel, and led me to ponder whether, when (not if) I went to hell, it would just be an eternal cocktail party.

Chante was there, talking to two women. Minette was not. Nor was handsome George Selkirk. But I was pretty sure at least a few of the movie folk had deigned to come and eat Stella's free prawns.

The action took place mostly on the expansive terrace beside the inevitable infinity pool, three dozen people in resort wear holding glasses of wine and snagging hors d'oeuvres from passing waiters. It was a warm night, late May, the dividing line between 'rather warm' and 'too bloody hot.' The moon had either set or not yet risen, and cirrus dimmed the stars. The Mediterranean was black ink, decorated by twinkling ships' lights, distant

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floating votive candles, full of fat tourists, or fish, or smuggled goods. If I'd been able to swap the wine for Scotch, light a cigar, and get rid of all the people, it would have been a lovely night.

'You are Mr Mitre, I believe?'

I was at the edge of the terrace looking with some longing at my own villa down the hill. I smiled (some might prefer the term 'grimaced') and extended my hand to a short, stocky man with more scalp than hair, densely-black eyebrows that seemed on the verge of becoming an eyebrow, singular, and a missing canine tooth. He was wearing a low-end gray suit with elbows that would need patching soon, a white shirt that had been stained by coffee at least once and never successfully cleaned, tired black leather shoes from the Stolid Footwear catalog, and an air of bone-deep skepticism. That wasn't enough to prove that he was some sort of cop, but it was enough to raise the little hairs on the back of my neck.

'I am Cyril Kiriakou, and may I say that I am a big fan?'

'Oh, thanks,' I said, hoping my heart's skipped beats wouldn't be apparent. 'I didn't even know my books were translated into Greek.'

'Hah! Very true. I read them in English. In your efficient, unflowery prose, which I find so refreshing.'

In the *New York Review of Books*, 'efficient prose' would be an insult. Not one I could deny, frankly, but definitely an insult.

'Thank you again,' I said. Because he was not the *New York Review of Books*.

'I don't wish to take up your time,' Kiriakou said, 'but in my official capacity I do like to meet new members of the expat community.'

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‘Official capacity?’ I asked, as I measured the distance to the door using the great-panicky-leaps unit of measurement.

‘Yes, I am the assistant chief of police for the Paphos region.’ He waved a hand vaguely, presumably to sketch the extent of his territory, which at very least included the terrace. ‘I had hoped to meet you at some point, in both my official capacity, to welcome you to Cyprus, and unofficially as a true fan.’

‘Is there a great deal of crime on Cyprus?’ At least I think that’s what I said. In my head, it sounded like *wa wa wa wa wa wa wa wa wa wa wa wa*?

Kiriakou shrugged with hands as well as shoulders. He tilted his head side to side. He raised his eyebrows. ‘Normally, no. Pickpockets, tourist scams, the usual domestics. In an average year, we get around twenty murders – the lowest rate in the EU.’ He deployed the statistic as a point of pride but he didn’t look personally happy about it. ‘And of course very few of those would be of any interest to your readers.’

‘What, dull murders were they?’

He laughed and nodded. ‘Drunken bar fights, revenge killings, domestics, usually cut and dried. That is the phrase? It is an Americanism, I believe.’

‘Yes. It is. Though we usually say just cut and dry.’

He glanced around to see who was within hearing, turned a suddenly serious face to me and lowered his voice. ‘At the moment, however, we have a murder that does not fit any of those categories.’

‘You must mean that poor woman on the beach, yesterday.’  
Blink. ‘Indeed.’

‘It seems I just missed seeing it. At least I must have, I didn’t

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notice anything. I did hear a scream as I was crossing the terrace of the hotel, but I assumed it was just children playing. From what I saw on the news it must have happened right after I left the beach bar. I feel terrible that I . . . Well, this sounds bad, I guess, but I've never been anywhere near an actual murder, and to be a mystery writer and miss an actual murder . . .' I did a self-deprecating laugh that had it lasted another second would have become hysterical. 'Well, it's a bit of a missed opportunity, to say the least.'

Kiriakou was watching me and smiling, nodding as if he understood, though perhaps did not quite share, my bloodthirsty curiosity. He held that smile after I stopped talking. Held the smile and the look, waiting.

I told myself it didn't mean anything. Cops are like that, they're trained in the uncomfortably-extended conversational pause. Also trained to smell fear, and I smelled. I didn't like being near a senior cop. A beat cop, no problem, but an assistant whatever of whatever? But I was not an amateur, so I would not try desperately to fill the silence.

'Of course for me it is just work,' Kiriakou said at last, shooing work away with a flutter of fingers. 'Work for which, to be quite perfectly honest, I have only limited experience and even more limited resources.'

'But you must have suspects?'

'Suspects plural?'

'Well, there you have me, deputy chief, you see, if I were writing the story of the murder I would need suspects, plural. Otherwise it would be a rather short book.'

The policeman looked pained. He had quite an expressive

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face, unlike American cops who work hard to appear emotionless. What I did not know was how much of it was show. He winced, his fifth or sixth expression in about two minutes.

‘I wonder what an American policeman would do?’ He made a lopsided smile. ‘NYPD? Or your own New Midland police?’

I shrugged. ‘Arrest the first black guy they saw and beat a confession out of him?’ I paused and added, ‘That’s a joke, of course. Mostly. I suppose it would be all the usual – fingerprints and . . .’

‘No fingerprints were found.’

I stopped myself from saying, *What not on the wine bottle?* The guy wasn’t wearing gloves. Instead I said, ‘Forensics on the murder weapon?’

‘We do not have the murder weapon.’

‘Eyewitnesses?’

‘Oh, plenty of those,’ Kiriakou said, with a roll of his eyes and a wry smirk. ‘The suspect was male and black. We questioned twenty-three witnesses and those two points are all they agree on. I have one eyewitness who claims he saw the suspect running with a Kalashnikov and yelling, “*Allahu akbar*.”’

‘Mmm,’ I said. ‘Eyewitnesses. Almost as reliable as your daily horoscope.’

He blew out his cheeks. ‘No physical evidence, not even footprints since it was on grass. Useless witnesses. And no motive. Yet it was clearly premeditated. The man had carried a bottle of wine on a tray, like a waiter. And he had the presence of mind to wipe both clean.’

I concealed my surprise. The killer had stopped and calmly wiped his prints? ‘Who was the woman? The victim? Was there a romantic thing, maybe?’

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His eyes dismissed the possibility of romantic entanglement, as well he should – I'd thrown it out there to make myself look a bit thick because I had a bad feeling about where this was going.

'Ah, now there's where it becomes interesting,' Kiriakou said, moving too close. 'She had a British passport, but our routine query to the British Home Office came back with a suggestion that the passport might be a forgery. That is perhaps not too surprising. But then, just this afternoon, the Home Office said it was indeed a valid passport.'

'Bureaucrats,' I said, and got no reaction.

'What caught the eye of my clever assistant – she is much more techno than I – is that the two replies came from different origins. Both emails appear to be official emails, but only the first comes from an internet address associated with the Home Office.'

I said, 'Well, you're asking the wrong guy if you're looking for information on internet-related issues.' More calculated thickness on my part.

'So, I followed up with an acquaintance of mine at Scotland Yard, a fellow I met at a conference in Geneva. I sent him the dead woman's fingerprints. And just before I left to come here for Dame Stella's sparkling and delightful party, I heard back.' The words 'sparkling and delightful' came with a nod toward our hostess across the terrace where she was chatting up a distinguished-looking gent.

I favored Kiriakou with a look of benign, even conspiratorial amusement. 'Are you building suspense, Mr Kiriakou?'

He liked that a lot. 'Ah! Of course, the writer in you looks for literary tropes. Hah hah!'

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I was a bit surprised that he knew the word ‘trope,’ let alone how to use it properly. It’s not the sort of word an assistant police chief typically comes across, and it came to me that a few years earlier *Publishers Weekly* had used that word in a review of one of my books. Had Kiriakou researched me? That wasn’t good. But my puzzlement was almost immediately replaced by a much starker emotion, because Kiriakou spoke the ‘F’ word.

‘It appears the victim was a fugitive. There are both British and Belgian arrest warrants for Rachel Faber.’

I don’t think my squeak was audible. ‘A fugitive? Ah, the plot thickens.’

I don’t always spout lines of Conan Doyle when I’m startled, but it was the best I could manage.

‘Ah, but that much plot is all we have, it has not thickened any further,’ Kiriakou said. Then, hesitant – well, hesitant unless he was playing me – he said, ‘I don’t wish to impose on you in any way, and please you are free to say no, and I will understand. But . . .’

I waited with an expectant but resolutely not guilty look on my face.

‘I wonder if you would have an hour free to have lunch with me and perhaps offer me your insights?’

‘Of course, I would be happy to,’ I lied. ‘But I hope you understand that I’m only a writer, I am not a trained investigator. I’m certainly not a murder cop!’

To which he replied with a Cypriot shrug, ‘To be quite perfectly honest, neither am I. Normally such cases are handled by the chief inspector of criminal investigation in Nicosia, but poor fellow, he is in hospital for an operation. Hernia. Very painful.’



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At that point Dame Stella swept by, gathering me up to glad-hand her other semi-celebrity, the movie's assistant director, as well as various local pooh-bahs and some geezer named Jeremy Berthold, who Dame Stella whispered was 'a very important man in the British expat community.' I stood nodding thoughtfully as Berthold and Stella's loopy hubby and a man who looked far too much like Rowan Atkinson discussed the eternal reunification negotiations.

Suddenly Berthold turned to me. 'So, you write paperback mystery novels, do you?'

And just like that I hated him. 'Actually I write manuscripts which the publisher turns into hardcovers, and a year later releases as paperbacks.'

He was a big man, maybe fifty-five, wide and beefy in the shoulders. He had the look of a man who'd been professionally fit at some point in his life, maybe ex-military, and had let himself go a bit to seed. He was trying the Oxbridge snob act on me.

'But popular novels, yes?'

'Not as popular as I'd like. I mean, sure, I outsell most of your Booker Prize-winning . . . I have that right, don't I? It is the Booker Prize, right? I sometimes confuse Booker and *Bake-Off*. Anyway, I would love to be still more popular.'

I finished that up with a grin I save for snobs. It's a sneering gangsterish grin, openly challenging; the toothy version of *Bring it on, pal, bring it on*.

I love a snob. They always think they have something. They don't understand that the thing they think they have is only as real as I'm willing to make it. Berthold's eyes took on a distant chill and something distinctly not Oxbridge was looking across

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at me. Credit where it's due, for a posh old snot he quickly parsed the situation, read my cockiness correctly and said, 'Then I must wish you success.'

'Thanks,' I said cheekily. 'And I'm terribly sorry, but your name was . . .'

I left him to mutter about rude, uncultured Americans. It was stupid of me to poke an important guy in the expat community, I was trying to fit in and go unnoticed. I should have ducked my head sheepishly and made some self-deprecating remark. But my blood was up, as the old saying goes: I had an actual cop to worry about and some puffed-up old fart who wanted to score points off me was irrelevant.

Out of the corner of my eye I tracked Kiriakou, who wandered genially around the room shaking hands and working his expressive eyebrows. The threat of panic was past, leaving a sour paranoia in its wake. There's a definite tendency among my people – fugitives, not writers – to sound the alarms. Ten false alarms for every justified one. But a conversation with a cop the day after a murder right where I happened to be drinking beer was, by definition, a justified alarm.

As soon as I could do it without attracting attention I made my farewells, found the door and threaded my way through parked Mercedes and BMWs – and a rather nice old Triumph – to the privacy, if not safety, of my villa and the comfort of the Isle of Skye's best.

## FOUR

I committed my first crime at age four.

We were living in southern California in those days. My birth father, sensible fellow, had seen where things were headed and had disappeared. My very young mother and I were living with my maternal grandparents.

And I wanted money. No doubt my need was great, I don't recall the specifics, but I can only assume a desire for candy was involved.

But first, before crossing over to the dark side, I tried entrepreneurship. I had a black plastic toy medical kit from which I dumped the stethoscope and syringe, and that thing you use for looking in ears, and into which (the kit, not the ears) I poured a boxful of vanilla wafers. I set off around the neighborhood as the world's first (and probably last) door-to-door vanilla wafer salesman. Amazingly I was able to sell some to a bemused woman who answered her door. I think she gave me a dollar. But even in those days a dollar didn't go far, so when I got home I noticed some crumpled bills and loose change on my grandfather's mahogany chest of drawers. I took the money and claimed it had come from robust Nilla sales.

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Four years old. My first misdemeanor. If only I'd thought to take a commemorative photo.

My second crime came later when, at age twelve, I tapped my mother and stepfather's telephone landline. It was easy enough: a matter of a headphone, a wire stripper, and some black electrical tape. The crime: successful but pointless. Neither parent had anything interesting to say, by which I mean that none of their calls were about me.

By age nineteen, I was a high school dropout working for a major law firm in Washington DC, in the law library as a messenger and obtainer of hard-to-get documents. My boss called me into his office one day, and said, 'I need you to run something over to a fellow at the Government Printing Office.'

'Okay.'

Then he pulled out a sheet of paper. He laid a small stack of greenbacks on the paper, folded it neatly, stuffed it into an envelope, sealed it and held it out to me. 'It's an invitation to my daughter's bat mitzvah. Discreet, right?'

'Discreet,' I agreed and took the envelope.

Not much of a crime, though I imagine bribing a government employee is a criminal offense of sorts, unless you're a campaign donor. The interesting thing to me looking back – as a guy whose current job is creating characters with backstories and motivations and notions of good and evil – is my complete lack of qualms. Steal from grandparents: nothing. Wiretap parents: nothing. Deliver payola: nothing. I had seen Bugs Bunny cartoons, I knew there was supposed to be a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other, but I was morally one-shouldered.

A year later, despite having dropped out of high school, I had

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beaten the various tests and been accepted to San Francisco State University. It was my last attempt to reintegrate into normal society, I suppose. God knows what I had in mind. Bong construction wasn't my *declared* major, that would have been philosophy, but getting high and seducing arts majors was much more fun than reading Kant and Husserl. I dropped out and, in one of the inexplicable sudden turns that define my life, ended up working for the Denny's restaurant chain as a graveyard shift manager, eleven p.m. to seven a.m.

Skimming off the register at Denny's was pitifully easy, so long as you didn't go overboard. We all skimmed – management to pay the help off the books and improve their labor cost numbers, and we humbler employees because, well, because fuck it: there it was, all green and foldable. But skimming is too much risk for too little reward. You don't want to end up in general population at Chuckawalla, or God forbid Folsom, having to admit you got popped for a forty-dollar-a-day skim; that's just embarrassing. So, on the theory that I had not yet made a complete hash of my life and needed to get on with it, I pulled my first major felony.

I knew the physical layout of Denny's restaurants, and I knew how lazy managers were about using the awkward safes in their offices. I drove a few towns away to a unit with the identical layout, cut my way through the roof access, then down through the office ceiling where I found what I expected: an open safe stuffed with seven thousand dollars. It was all very *Mission: Impossible The Movie* if the movie had had a props budget of ten dollars. Sure, it would have been great to have a laser to cut through the wallboard, but a box-cutter worked well enough.

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Needs must, as the Brits say.

For a while after that I drove around the US in an ancient but lovable green Karmann Ghia convertible with a paper bag of cash in the trunk. Good times. Especially that commune in . . . somewhere hot. Peyote plays hell with memory. Arizona? New Mexico? One of those. I remember fleas, cacti and lots of sand.

Two more Denny's burglaries, one for a solid ten grand, and I'd basically found a way to live as a parasite.

Then I was arrested. Not a good moment. I had walked into an acquaintance's antique shop in Carson City (where no fencing of questionably obtained goods took place, nope,) and I had seen the two detectives sitting there, questioning him about my whereabouts. I had played it cool for fifteen seconds, pretending to shop, then made for the exit. Twenty yards down the street they called my name: Martin DeKuyper, my actual birth name. If I remember correctly.

You might bluff it out and keep walking if a cop calls John Smith, or Joe Anderson, but Martin DeKuyper was too specific to pull off the 'I thought they meant some other . . .'

Handcuffs. Mug shots. Bend over.

That was not a good day. However clever or suave or tough you think you are, it's hard to carry it off in what the cons call a four-by-four: handcuffs, shackled ankles and a chain around the waist of your freshly deloused orange onesie.

*Oooh, I'm prisoner number 6732 and 32 is my lucky number!*

I spent eleven days inside before I could make bail. The food was lousy, and a constant fear of a beating, a rape or a knifing tends to cast a pall over things. I was a young smartass, a two-bit burglar, chump-change embezzler and failed vanilla-wafer

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salesman. I wasn't the kind of hard case who hurt people. I didn't go around frightening folks. No one was locking up wives and daughters for fear of Martin DeKuyper. I wasn't one of *those* guys, but there were definitely some of those guys in that cage with me. I was admittedly a bad boy, but some of the men in there were evil.

People who dismiss the idea that you can sense evil have never been to jail. Look for guys with tears tattooed on their faces, or guys who are small and weak yet everyone steers well clear of – even guys with big swastika chest tattoos stretching from nipple to nipple.

That's another sign, the swastika tattoo.

I finally made bail, promptly jumped said bail, and began my life as a fugitive from justice.

Not quite twenty years had passed since then, with half of that time spent expanding my criminal repertoire beyond burglary into the exciting and lucrative world of scams and cons and the occasional high-value theft. I started in the domestic market: the posher reaches of New York, Washington, LA, Houston and points between, before realizing that my work would be so much easier and safer if I took the act overseas. And I enjoy foreign travel: it broadens the mind.

It was crime that made me a writer. No grifter can avoid being a decent storyteller, and you meet very interesting people out there in the world outside the law. I was good at lying, good at inventing legends about myself, good at building narratives that would appeal to widows and divorcees with more money than sense.

In this I had been helped by my appearance, which runs to

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the Clive Owen, dark hair, blue eyes, impishly flirtatious sort of thing. I can pull off the open-necked white shirt and blue blazer look, and was in fact pulling it off at the moment. Or I can do the worn designer jeans and Tommy Bahama camp shirt. I can even manage not to look ridiculous in a tuxedo. I look like I might be the ne'er-do-well third son of wealthy parents – trouble, but of the fun kind, like that ginger prince, what's-his-name? Harry. The kind of man women like for a few days or a week while hubby is away on business.

In a well-run, successful scam, I could clear a quarter million. A burglary could net from twenty-five large to a hundred grand. I made about as much on my first book, all-in, as I did on a decent burglary, and I suppose I could have gone on doing both, but I was getting older, the universe of lonely women in the one percent demographic is not endless, and I had by then reached the essential insight that all criminals come to if they're bright enough: the game is not fox and hounds with clever fox evading pursuing hounds, tally-ho; the game is tightrope walker and floor.

The police are the floor. I was the guy on the rope. One wrong step, and the floor would be waiting. It would wait forever.

So, about ten years back I sized everything up, and went straight. Well, straight aside from fake ID and the occasional bit of creative accounting. And being a fugitive.

*Straight-ish.*

But the thief and the con were still part of me, probably always would be. I still saw the weakness in security systems and the vulnerabilities in people. I sometimes amused myself figuring out just how one would go about stealing, say, the Mona Lisa from the Louvre. (I have a plan.) Or creating a fake charity,



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signing a celebrity to attend, throwing a gala and walking away with the contributions while I had teams go through the empty homes of attendees. (I have a plan for that, too.) Or using an office-cleaning service to access computers at a brokerage house and selling the passwords to the Armenian mob.

Okay, that one I actually did. It was quite lucrative, but with several terrifying moments involving guns and threats of castration. Credible threats.

I have a natural repugnance for violence, so I never hurt anyone except in their wallets and pride, and only then if they could afford it – there's no point stealing from anyone who isn't rich. Middle-class people will call the cops over a hundred bucks, but my victims could shrug off a hundred large just because they didn't want to waste an hour talking to dull working-class folks like detectives.

Anyway, the point is that while I was a crook, I was not a bad person. Mostly. And in the early years I held firmly to that belief. I was a gentleman thief, like Cary Grant, more amusing than threatening.

But then Arthur Wilson Janes disagreed with that generous self-assessment, and did so in convincing style by putting a nine millimeter in his mouth and blowing his brains all over the gorgeous interior of his two million dollar Bugatti.

Not my fault. I told myself.

An unfaithful wife and fifty grand from a man who drove a car that cost almost fifty times that? Kill yourself over *that*? Over a bit of cuckolding? Over chump change? Anyone who would do that was already suicidal, I told myself. Not my fault the guy couldn't take a joke, I told myself.

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Not my fault at all, I still told myself on lonely nights as I waited for Ambien and whisky to send me off to dreamland.

And yet, there were the consequences, even the mundane sequelae, the fact that my victims had to fill out insurance forms, and upgrade their security and perhaps be embarrassed or humiliated. Or endure a divorce. Or blow off half their head while destroying a gorgeous leather interior and shattering the moon roof.

I've read that a man's brain does not reach full maturity until he's in his twenties and that this explains a tendency in many males to reckless behavior, to sociopathy. I was a late bloomer. I was in my early thirties when it began to occur to me that I was just possibly a bit of an asshole.

But by that point I'd already long known in that way you can suppress but never quite shake off that I had taken a wrong turn in life. Well, several wrong turns, a couple dozen, but it was one particular point in time that stuck with me, one particular wrong turn, one indelible image that haunted me: the image of a girl in a window.

In a few days, it would be exactly nineteen years since I'd done the stupid thing and rejected that escape. I don't remember the exact date when I learned that Janes had painted his impromptu Rothko in blood and viscera. But I remember the exact goddamned date when I started firmly down the road to making that happen.