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COULTER**

AND J. T. ELLISON

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CUT**

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CATHERINE COULTER

and **J. T. ELLISON**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*To J. T. Ellison for accompanying me on this wonderful new journey. You're one of the very best
~~decisions I ever made. I'm sure Nicholas Drummond will take us on another super adventure.~~*

*To Karen Evans, my right hand and left hand and half my brain, whose oar is always rowing the boat
smartly forward.*

*Thank you both for your great dedication to this special project and your enthusiasm and constant
good humor.*

*To Angela Bell, FBI, thank you for your continued assistance. You're such a treasure. Imagine,
Nicholas Drummond is indeed the very first Brit in the FBI (verified by the FBI).*

—CATHERINE COULTER

PROLOGUE

Ritz Paris
15 Place Vendôme
The Bar Vendôme
Two years ago

Saleem drummed his long fingers on the table, giving only a cursory glance out the window to the clear Parisian night, and wondered yet again—*Where is he?* Ten minutes late. No one kept him waiting, no one. The Fox had set this meeting at the Ritz. The least he could do was be on time.

He caught his reflection in the glass and was pleased with what he saw. His dinner jacket fit like a dream, and he looked important, a man to be respected and feared, the way his father had always taught him.

Yet the Fox, this common *thief*, was keeping him waiting.

He sensed heads turning, and looked up. An incredible woman was strolling across the bar in a skintight black dress and tall, sharp stilettos, her sleek black hair pulled back in a twist, showing the fine bones of her face. She was lithe and moved like a dancer. She looked expensive and mysterious, and maybe there was a hint of danger in that arrogant tilt of her head? Like every other breathing man in the bar, he felt a kick of lust. He enjoyed the show for a moment, then dismissed her. He had bigger fish to fry tonight.

He looked at his watch again. Annoyed, he shot his cuffs and sat back, staring out into the star-studded Parisian sky. Five more minutes, then he would leave. They could set another meeting, on his terms this time, and the Fox would be clear as to who was in control.

He glanced back at the woman and saw she was staring at him as she walked slowly toward him. She didn't pause, didn't look at anyone else, only him. He didn't need this now. He only wanted his thief to show up and get this job settled.

She stopped at his table and said, "You are Saleem. I am here to do business with you."

A waiter hovered behind her, a bottle of Dom Pérignon in his hands. She nodded. He pulled out her chair and she sat down.

Saleem stared, his mind scrambling. What was going on here? Had the Fox sent this exotic creature to do his business for him? Was she his mistress? What?

As if she could read his mind, she said with a small smile, "I am who you seek, Saleem."

He'd searched for three months before he'd finally found the Fox. He would have never guessed the master thief was this woman who looked more like a rich man's mistress than the most successful thief in the world. She was stunning, true, but it was her eyes that knocked a man on his heels—they were a clear, icy blue, the irises rimmed in black, imperceptibly slanted at the corners. And she was looking at him straight on, amused at his surprise, waiting for him to speak. He realized in that moment the fact that she was a woman served his purposes very well indeed. Yes, this was perfect.

The skill set the Fox provided was unparalleled. Legendary, even. The best—he'd heard it from his father and several trusted men of his acquaintance.

He wondered dispassionately if in addition to stealing she was any good in bed. After they finished

their business, would she want to go upstairs to his suite? He supposed he wouldn't mind, but first things first.

He watched the waiter fill her flute with champagne. She raised the flute, tipped it toward him for a moment. No smile, only a rather bored assessment in her clear blue eyes. It shocked him. She found him boring? He watched her drink the champagne straight down, never taking her eyes off him, fully aware he was watching her every move. She slowly licked her lips. A signal?

He still said nothing, merely signaled to the waiter to pour her another. She drank again, still silent. He knew all the men in the bar were looking at them, wondering what she was to him. How their expressions would change if he announced to the bar who and what she was.

He sipped his Macallan, felt the smooth fire of the sixty-four-year-old whiskey slide down his throat.

When he'd finally found the Fox, they'd corresponded through a coded email account utilizing a simple and elegant system of protection—they both had passwords to the account. Saleem would write an email and save it as a draft, and the Fox would log in, read the mail in the drafts folder, delete it, then write a response and save it to drafts. They'd been writing for weeks now, the messages short, direct. They'd scheduled this, their first and only meeting, last week, and the account had been dormant since. He'd believed he knew women, knew how they thought, knew how they negotiated to get what they wanted, but never had he gotten the slightest hint the Fox was a woman. Amazing.

He set his glass on the table. "Are you really the person I seek?"

She only nodded again, that slight smile playing around her mouth. She never looked away from him.

Saleem said slowly, "Very well. Let us begin."

She slid a piece of paper across the table. Her hands were slim and elegant, nails short and polished the palest pink. Her forearm slid briefly from the edge of her sleeve with a graceful whisper of fabric and her delicate wrist turned slightly. He saw generations of her ancestors in the sleek, unconscious movement. Like a geisha serving him tea before she robbed him blind and slipped a knife between his ribs.

He opened the slip of paper and kept his face still, not reacting to the number she'd written. Never in their emails had they discussed her price.

He looked up to see her watching him, her eyes so blue he would swear that if he looked long enough, he would see the azure skies of his homeland, except he realized in that moment her eyes were blank and empty and devoid of anything but shrewd amusement. A chill moved down his spine. He'd never felt this sort of fear before in his life, of anyone, particularly a woman. He hated it, yet it was there deep inside him, this knowledge of her, and with it was a corrosive fear.

Her voice was deep and soft, and he leaned forward automatically when she spoke, though he could hear her clearly above the conversations in the bar.

"You are surprised."

"Yes."

"That is nothing for something so priceless." She snapped her fingers and looked away, but not before he saw the indifference in her eyes, and it enraged him. She knew he would pay the amount she'd written on the paper, doubtless guessed he'd pay double her price, triple if necessary, his need was so great. He realized there was no real negotiating here. And they both knew it.

He sat back in his chair and watched her finish her champagne, her every move elegant, studied. He'd take the deal she offered because he couldn't trust this job to anyone else. He needed the very best. So much money, but he knew she'd earn every penny.

She looked calm, sure of herself, and he wanted to hurt her.

Before his father had died, he'd told Saleem of this thief called the Fox, and there had been

admiration in his voice. But his father had never told him the Fox was a woman. Had he known? Of course he'd known. His father had also told him the Fox was Saleem's age, no older, and when he'd seen her strolling toward him, he'd believed her younger. *The Fox is the very best, my son, the very best. I only knew of one failure, and it was an impossible task.* But his father wouldn't tell him about the failure, merely looked through him, beyond him, when he'd asked.

Looking at her now, Saleem wondered if this job was to be her final curtain. Well, why not? With the amount of money he was paying her, she could retire, take no more chances of getting caught and hung. She could disappear permanently, settle down. No more looking over her shoulder. The world would be her oyster and he would give her the pearl.

The waiter arrived with more champagne. When her glass was full, she lifted it, hovering over the midpoint of the table. "Half now. Do we have an agreement?"

Saleem met her eyes and raised his whiskey.

"We do. Yes, I believe we do."

For the first time, she clinked her glass to his, took a small sip to seal the bargain, and placed the flute on the table. She stood.

So she didn't want to go upstairs with him. Too bad. The words spilled from his mouth anyway, even though he didn't mean it, a stupid knee-jerk man's reaction to a beautiful woman.

"You should stay tonight. With me."

She didn't laugh, but he thought she wanted to. She said in a low, smooth voice, a brow arched, "I already know where you sleep, Saleem Singh Lanighan. I don't believe I care to join you."

Surprise hit him like a fist. He'd taken all possible measures to be anonymous, to hide himself thoroughly. But she'd found his true identity. But how?

"You know my full name?"

A predator's contempt flashed in her cool blue eyes. "Of course I know your name. I know everything about you."

Everything? She knew he was his father's son?

In his business dealings he'd always held the upper hand, always wielded the final power over his opponents. He knew it was whispered he was the Devil, and he liked that. All recognized he was cunning, confident of his own worth, the one to be placated, the one who was feared. No longer.

He'd met the real Devil tonight, and she drank champagne. Was his father watching him? And laughing?

The Fox said, "I will email the information, then you will close the account. When half the money—a full twenty-five million—is wired to my account, I will begin. Not a moment before. You will not hear from me again. I will come to you when the job is finished. It is a pleasure doing business with you."

"Wait." He stood as well. He cleared his throat, spoke quietly because he knew well the effect of his voice, knew the arrogance of his breeding and background came clearly through.

"I know your reputation, so I am not surprised you managed to discover who I am. However, I only know you as the Fox. Give me your real name. For fifty million dollars, I am owed at least that."

The Devil smiled from the Fox's beautiful face, and that cold, cold smile froze his blood.

"You are owed nothing but your prize, lion cub. Or should I call you the Lion now? Your father's untimely death places you in control. Will you be as interesting as your father, lion cub? Will you show yourself cunning and ripe, ready for plunder?"

She fell silent for a moment, assessing him yet again, then dismissed him with a nod, and he knew to his gut she didn't fear him, not at all. But if she failed in this, she would regret her mistake. He would kill her himself.

His voice rose. "If you're going to work for me, you'll do as I say. Now tell me your name."

He would swear she looked into his very soul then and found him wanting. Quiet and calm, she said, “Be patient and you will be rewarded.”

He wouldn't allow this, not from a criminal who believed herself above him, above the Lion. She would heed this demand. He caught her arm and drew her near.

Her voice was perfectly pleasant. “Let go of me this instant.”

He squeezed her arm, hard. He wasn't going to let her believe he was of little or no account except for his huge riches. She needed to understand who he was, what he was, what he could do to her. He was the Lion now, and what he wanted he got.

“Your real name,” he said. “I insist.”

The patrons were beginning to notice their standoff. Saleem knew the last thing she'd want was to be remembered, so he was pleased when she smiled and leaned in close as if she were kissing him good-bye. She whispered in his ear as she stroked her palm across his neck, and he dropped her arm with a gasp.

With an ice-cold smile, she said, “Do not look for me, Saleem Singh Lanighan. I will find you.”

She walked away. He felt the other men's eyes follow her every step through the lounge. Then she was gone, disappeared out to the street into the Paris night.

Saleem sat back down and pressed his napkin to the side of his neck against the sting. He didn't know where she'd had the knife hidden, but she'd managed to bring it to his throat without anyone noticing. He felt the thin gash throb, and with it, he tasted fear, fear of the Devil.

She'd left him with three words, words that would settle in his belly and sigh in his brain for months to come. He realized he'd heard the name before, not from his father, but from other men, whispered in the darkest corners, but he'd never realized, never known, and now he was left to wonder how long he would feel her cold lips trailing down his throat, following the thin stream of blood as she whispered her name.

“I am Kitsune.”

London
Present
Thursday, before dawn

Nicholas Drummond lived for these moments. His shoulders were relaxed, his hands loose, warm, and ready inside thin leather gloves. He could feel his heart beat a slow, steady cadence, feel the adrenaline shooting so high he could fly. His breath puffed white in the frigid morning air, not unexpected on an early January morning in London. There was nothing like a hostage situation to get one's blood pumping, and he was ready.

He took in the scene as he'd been trained to do, complemented by years of experience: shooters positioned on the roofs in a three-block triangular radius, sirens wailing behind shouts and screams, and a single semiautomatic weapon bursting out an occasional staccato drumbeat. The streets were shut down in all directions. A helicopter's rotors whumped overhead. His team was lined up behind him, waiting for the go signal.

His suspect was thirty yards away, tucked out of sight, ten feet from the left of the entrance to the Victoria Street Underground, and not shy about letting them know his position. He'd been told the guy was a nutter—not a surprise, given he'd been wild-eyed in his demands for money from a second-rate kiosk at dawn. Instead of making a run for it, he'd grabbed a woman and was now holed up, shooting away. Where he had found a semiautomatic weapon, plus enough ammunition to take out Khartoum, Nicholas didn't know. He didn't care about the answer, only wanted this to end peaceably.

At least the hostage hadn't been killed yet. She was a middle-aged woman, now lying on her side maybe six feet from the shooter, trussed up with duct tape. They could see her face, leached of color and terrified. He could imagine her screams of terror if her mouth weren't taped.

No, she wasn't dead. Yet. Which presented a problem—one wrong move and a bullet would go into her head.

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder at his second, Detective Inspector Gareth Scott, tucked against the curb, his expression edgy, a flash of excitement in his eyes. He clutched his Heckler & Koch MP5 against his chest. His Glock 17 was in its shoulder holster.

The suspect stopped firing his weapon, and there was sudden blessed silence. Nicholas didn't think the guy had run out of bullets. Had the gun jammed? They should be so lucky. What was he thinking? Planning?

Nicholas dropped down beside Gareth. "We have ourselves a crazy. Brief me on the rest."

"We have a photo, taken from the eastern rooftop. It's blurred, but Facial Recognition did their magic. The guy's name is Esposito, out of prison only a month. I guess he woke up real early and decided he needed some excitement in his life and went on this little rampage."

"What set him off?"

"We don't know. He took four quid out of the kiosk till, all the guy had at this hour of the morning and grabbed the woman when the police showed up."

Esposito raised his weapon again and blasted half a dozen bullets into the foggy morning air.

Nicholas saw a brief glimpse of the man's head, but the angle made it impossible for the snipers to take him out. He wouldn't give them permission to fire anyway, not if there was a chance of hitting the woman. He had to make a decision—time was running short.

Nicholas glanced at his watch. 5:16 a.m., an ungodly hour in winter, barely light enough to see. At least it wasn't raining, but clouds were fat and black overhead, all they needed to make this a real party.

Esposito continued shooting, then stopped mid-blast and shouted, "You stupid coppers back off or she's dead, you hear me? I'll let her go as soon as I'm clear!"

There was return gunfire, and Esposito screamed, "Shoot at me again and I swear I'll kill her. Back off. Back off!"

Nicholas shouted, "We'll back off. Don't hurt the woman."

Esposito's answer was a bullet that flew a couple of feet over Nicholas's head. "Enough," Nicholas said. "Let's get him."

"You want him alive?"

"We'll see," Nicholas said. "We need a better angle. Follow me."

They duck-walked across the street, then flattened, faces to the ground, just before a fusillade of bullets kicked up gravel two feet away from their earlier position. Gareth cursed. "At least the guy's lousy shot."

Silence again, except for their fast breaths. Nicholas didn't think Esposito had seen them move. "Keep still and stay down," he whispered. They were only twenty yards downwind now, sheltered by the construction in front of the station's façade. A good spot, though if Esposito moved, turned, he might very well see them and they'd be dead.

Almost as if he knew what they were doing, Esposito grabbed the woman, held her in front of him as a shield and dragged her fifteen feet before pulling her down behind a big metal construction bin. Now Esposito was facing away from them, a good thirty feet from their position. He was squatted down behind the bin, leaning around the side to check for threats, ready to fire.

And Nicholas thought, *This is surely a gift from the Almighty*. He was staring at the bottom of the construction bin. Its base was at least three inches off the ground. He smiled as he smoothly rolled onto his belly and pulled his Glock 17 from his shoulder holster. He aimed at those three precious inches on the underside of the bin, sighting carefully. The guy had big feet in shiny white Nikes, a bull's-eye target if there ever was one.

Nicholas squeezed the trigger. The man yelped and hopped away from the bin, stumbled, and went down hard on the pavement.

"Take him now!" Nicholas yelled into his shoulder radio. He jumped to his feet as he spoke. "And do mind his weapon, people."

His team rushed to surround Esposito, who'd fallen five feet from his hiding place behind the bin. He saw them running at him and slammed his weapon to the ground, threw his arms up in surrender, and the standoff was over. And no one was dead, or even badly hurt.

A metallic horn rang out signaling the engagement was over.

Gareth clapped his boss on the shoulder. "Nice one," he said, then called out, "A-Team, to me."

A smattering of applause made Nicholas turn, but before he could holster his Glock, a voice boomed over the loudspeaker. "Detective Chief Inspector Drummond. You have broken the rules of engagement, and are hereby disqualified. Report to me immediately."

Gareth shook his head. “Penderley does not sound happy, Nicholas. And all you’ve done is show some above-average imagination.”

Esposito limped over, his face twisted, so mad Nicholas wondered if he would throw a punch. But he simply squared off; his thick finger stabbed the air for emphasis. “You shot me in the bloody foot, you bloody sod!”

Nicholas couldn’t help it, he grinned. “You were so scrunched together I could have gotten you in the arse, but those big Nikes of yours were waving flags at me.”

“Yeah, have a big laugh. I’m serious, Drummond. I’m going to limp for a week. You weren’t supposed to shoot me; you were supposed to capture me unharmed. Those were the rules, but no, you had to show off. Those rubber bullets hurt.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “A woman’s life was in the balance. I had to act, not negotiate. You shouldn’t have made yourself such a target. Next time, pick a bin that hugs the tarmac.”

Gareth laughed and Esposito turned on him, gave both men a fist shake and limped off. Nicholas didn’t doubt there’d be payback at some point—the rubber bullets did hurt, he knew that firsthand—and Esposito was tough and smart; he’d come up with something that would make Nicholas want to weep, but that would be tomorrow or next week. Penderley was now.

“He’ll get over it,” Gareth said. “Buy him a pint at The Feathers tonight and he’ll soon forgive you.”

Not a chance, Nicholas thought, and went to see his boss, Hamish Penderley, detective chief superintendent of the Metropolitan Police’s Operational Command Unit, a stiff-necked old buzzard in his early sixties who’d played by the same set of rules for forty years, and would take those same rules to the grave with him. Penderley was self-made, public-school-educated, the third son of a barkeep in Coventry, and proud of it.

Nicholas came from wealth and an old name, and that rankled and galled some people he worked with. Thankfully, Penderley wasn’t one of them. His issue was Nicholas’s dual citizenship; he’d been born in the United States, making him less of a Brit in Penderley’s eyes.

Nicholas wound his way through the obstacle course to Penderley’s position on the grandstand, thinking about the newly instituted mandatory training exercises. Everyone was on edge. Actionable terrorist threats had been made against London—again—and the Metropolitan Police felt it necessary to refresh the training all their officers received. Nicholas and his team had been to Hendon for surprise tactical weapons drills four times in the last six months. Requalifying with weapons, being dragged out of bed for real response exercises, like this dawn’s kidnap-and-hostage scenario, anything and everything; it didn’t matter, Penderley threw all of it at them.

Nicholas had argued, as he always did, that his homicide team knew their stuff cold, would be better utilized brushing up their profiling skills and forensic accounting, but might equaled right in Penderley’s world. Penderley’s *old* world.

Disapproval clung to the man like a second skin. He was tall and skinny as a pole, standing on a dais with his hands on his hips, legs spread in a triangle, binoculars around his neck, a great view of the action. All he needed were jackboots. Safari leader or ranking copper? Close call. Nicholas kept

his mouth shut. He knew he could push only so far before Penderley blew, and by the look on his face Nicholas could tell the man was hovering at the edge.

“Sir.” Nicholas stood at attention in front of his boss, who, no dummy, had angled himself so the rising sun poured over his shoulder right into Nicholas’s eyes.

“Drummond.” His name came out in an exasperated warning, the tone he so often used when addressing Nicholas. “You were not authorized to shoot Inspector Esposito.”

“No, sir.” He avoided continuing his statement. If a “But sir” came out of his mouth, it would only send Penderley into hyperspace.

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?”

No, there’s a whole lot I have to say, but I didn’t wake up stupid this morning; I took this training exercise seriously, and I didn’t want to see the hostage dead, so I found the answer and brought down the nutter.

Penderley wanted him to protest, Nicholas saw it in his eyes, and he was tempted to say something to make the old bugger huff and puff, but he didn’t.

“Yes, sir.”

Penderley drew himself up straighter, if that were possible, and pronounced from on high, “Then you are disqualified.”

“But sir—”

Well, he’d done it now. The blow was coming.

Penderley’s body shifted, blocking the sun from Nicholas’s eyes. He blinked the older man into focus.

“I’ve told you a hundred times, Drummond. There are rules in this world. And when I delineate rules of engagement, you are expected to follow them. You will return to Hendon tomorrow morning with your team, and try it again. And this time, you will do it my way. Do you understand?”

Back and forth. Every day it was the same with them, back and forth, Penderley pushing, Nicholas pulling, never seeing eye to eye unless the threat was real and Nicholas was needed to break the rules.

“I believe the object of the exercise was to neutralize the threat.”

He heard a hiss behind him and turned to see Esposito glaring at him, leaning against the edge of the dais, still rubbing his sore foot.

Nicholas ignored Esposito and returned his eyes to his boss. “I neutralized the threat, and the hostage is safe. This is the outcome we all wanted.”

Penderley’s face turned red. Nicholas braced himself for the hammer, but it didn’t fall. Instead Penderley sighed, shook his head. “You try my patience, lad. Tomorrow morning. Five o’clock sharp. He smiled, a wolf with lots of sharp teeth, and added, his voice very precise, “Don’t be late or you’ll do it again the next day.” Penderley’s phone rang. “You’re excused.”

Nicholas stalked off, frustrated, wanting to kick something, but he headed straight for his car. One sore foot—surely that didn’t qualify as a bad outcome. What was the point of an exercise that didn’t accomplish the goal? In a real situation, his actions would get him more than a pat on the back.

Up at four o’clock tomorrow morning again. *Thank you, sir.*

He’d just put his hand on the gearshift when Penderley came rushing toward the car, waving his hands wildly to get Nicholas’s attention.

Nicholas stepped out of the BMW. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Penderley was out of breath, or choked up, Nicholas couldn’t be certain which. He soon realized it was both.

“Nicholas,” Penderley said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Terrible news. It’s Inspector Elaine York. She’s been murdered.”

New York, New York
1000 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Wednesday morning

The security was amazing, which didn't matter a bit, since she knew every single bell and whistle in place to protect the star of the *Jewel of the Lion* exhibit—the famous and infamous Koh-i-Noor diamond—currently nesting in the center of the queen mother's crown. As for all the boots on the ground, she knew their schedules, knew where they'd be each moment for the next hour.

She was whistling “Born to Be Wild” as she strolled into the museum café to order a cappuccino. She turned her face to the camera for a good look. She waved to the half-dozen staff she recognized, smiled, chatted, even nodded at a couple of museum visitors seated at the small tables.

Once she had her cappuccino in hand, she was careful to give the camera an excellent profile, establishing her whereabouts in the café. Once she paid for the drink, she continued toward the first-floor restrooms and walked directly through to the connecting staff door.

At the back of the hallway was a staircase to the basement. She set down her cappuccino, pulled on gloves, and slipped through the unlatched door to the basement. She ran down the three flights to the outer room of the museum's electrical grid. She paused a moment, listening. No one was about, not a single sound coming from anywhere.

She pulled a lovely bit of technology she'd borrowed from an IRA bomber out of her jacket pocket: a time-delayed electromagnetic pulse that coursed through a relay capacitor. She hummed as she placed the small device behind the bank of computers and set the timer. No permanent damage, but when it blew, the computers would shut down, the cameras would go blank, and the alarm systems would go offline. For five minutes, the entire museum would be off the grid—and that would be enough.

She went back to the fifth floor. And waited.

Three minutes to go.

Two.

One.

There was a small grinding noise, boom, boom, boom, and out went the lights.

Now the fun would begin.

London

Thursday morning

Nicholas no longer felt the cold. Memories flooded through him: Elaine's infectious laugh, her excellent mind, the touch of whimsy that colored her view of the world, and that need of hers to search out what hovered beyond what couldn't be seen, and of course there was more, much more. He thought of her lying against him in the night, her head nestling against his shoulder, her breathing soft and slow, the occasional whisper about her mother, who'd been diagnosed with Alzheimer's, her ex-husband's latest antics. But that was before she'd come to work for him. They hadn't lost each other, though. The gentler memories morphed smoothly into the Elaine he knew now, a smart, focused cop striding beside him, doing whatever was asked and some that wasn't. But no more whispers in the night, no more confidences.

He'd cared for her deeply, and now she was gone, simply gone in the blink of an eye. He remembered the night before she'd left for New York four months ago. A dozen coppers crowded at a table at The Feathers, all toasting her, wishing her luck with the queen mum's crown, warning her about horny Yanks.

This was impossible. A searing pain began in his chest.

"How?"

Penderley said, "Shot and dumped. Her body was found by two schoolchildren on the bank of the East River. We are waiting to hear from the New York FBI for the autopsy results. They will be heading the investigation into her death."

Nicholas was silent, and Penderley gave him a moment to absorb the reality. He knew the two worked very well together, knew they'd been closer before Elaine York had joined his unit last year. He rubbed his hand across his face, feeling very old. It shouldn't have happened, and it made no sense that it had happened. She was in New York as a minder for the crown jewels, not a bodyguard or a copper. Penderley felt the loss of her like a fist to the gut.

Nicholas was still trying to wrap his head around the impossible reality. "I don't understand. She was shot? Murdered? But that's impossible, isn't it? How could she have made enemies in New York working with the Metropolitan Museum of Art? I must go to New York. Immediately." He turned back to the car, and Penderley grabbed his arm.

"Slow down. It's a terrible thing, but you know she wanted this assignment, practically begged me to send her to New York with the crown jewels. Imagine, our precious jewels leaving England, what a bloody mistake they're making—"

Nicholas interrupted him. "I must go to New York, sir. Right now. I can catch the first flight."

Penderley dropped Nicholas's arm. "You think you can somehow get the FBI to accept you enough to fold you into their ranks, let you be involved in solving her murder? This is the *Americans* we're talking about here, Nicholas. Believe me, the FBI in New York have this well in hand. They don't want or need you."

Nicholas couldn't stand here, his breath making clouds in the morning mist, knowing someone had

shot Elaine, killed her, and wasn't already being punished for the crime. He had to act. One more try. "Sir, she was valuable—as a cop, as a person. I owe it to her. I'd owe it to any member of my team."

"You will stay right here. That's a direct order, Detective Chief Inspector Drummond. Don't forget you have training in the morning back here."

Training? When Elaine was dead? Was the old bugger nuts?

"Look, take the day. I must call her mother now. The good Lord knows if she'll even be able to understand me, what with the Alzheimer's. For heaven's sake, *stand down.*"

Penderley marched toward his ancient green Jaguar; the car was so old that Penderley's own son had learned to drive with it. Nicholas slid behind the wheel of his car, closed his eyes.

Elaine, dead. Maybe they'd misidentified the body. Surely that was possible. She was a foreigner, maybe—but when was the last time that had happened?

He put the car in gear and whipped it around, gravel spitting out from under the tires, glad he hadn't mentioned his uncle Bo, recently retired FBI special agent in charge of the New York Field Office, now the head of security for the *Jewel of the Lion* exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum. Bo liked Elaine. He would be happy for Nicholas's help. Especially if Nicholas talked to him before Penderley could shut him down.

The drive from the Peel Center, where Hendon Police College was housed, to Nicholas's home, Drummond House in Westminster, London, took twenty-five minutes. He left his BMW on the street, double-stepped the stairs, and was at the point of sticking his key in the door when his butler, Nigel, opened it and, seeing his master coming through the door like a Pamplona bull, quickly stepped aside.

"Sir? I wasn't expecting you home so soon. Is everything all right?"

Nicholas shouted over his shoulder as he ran up the stairs to change, "Everything is completely wrong, Nigel. Grab my go bag. I'm going to New York."

New York, New York
West Bank of the East River
Wednesday, midnight

Special Agent Michaela Caine watched the crime scene techs zip Inspector Elaine York's body in its black cocoon and line it up on the stretcher. She'd been called to the scene because York, a foreign national and therefore under the FBI's purview, had been found shot in the chest, washed up on the shore of the East River. She was an inspector with New Scotland Yard, and now she was dead on American soil. This was about as bad as it got.

Mike was freezing, the winter sunset a memory. The crime scene, now lit by four portable klieg lights, cast an unearthly glow and added exactly zero heat. More crime scene techs moved back and forth along the shoreline, searching for anything to explain how and why Inspector York's body had washed up on shore in this particular spot.

"This is a hell of a thing," said her boss Milo Zachery, the brand-new SAC of the New York Field Office Criminal Division. He looked miserable, and she couldn't blame him. He was right, this was a humongous mess, which was why she'd called to alert him as soon as she'd gotten a firm confirmation on the ID, and now he was here to assess the situation. Zachery was in his late forties, trim and fit, the quintessential FBI SAC. Looking at him made Mike stand up straighter.

"Everyone's going to be bloodied before this is over," he said. "Our Brit counterparts will go on the warpath if we don't handle this perfectly." He waved his hand toward the medical examiner's van. "York came over from Scotland Yard as a special attaché for the *Jewel of the Lion* exhibit at the Met before I was made SAC, so I'm not familiar with everything she was doing. An inspector with Scotland Yard, killed on our turf? Our butts are going to be shining in the spotlight. Run me through it; I'll need to be prepared when the wolves descend, and descend they will, big-time."

Mike said, "She was partnered up with Ben Houston, from Art Crimes; I called him right after I called you. He should be here any minute. He can give us all the details. He was really upset. He liked her, said she was sharper than his daddy's stiletto, and pretty as a Viking sunset, whatever that means." *But she's not pretty now*, and for a moment, Mike was so pissed she couldn't speak.

She continued, her voice steady. "We don't have much, sir. She was shot in the upper-left chest, small caliber, no exit. Might not be the actual cause of death. Outside of her badge clipped to her skin, no personal effects have been found. I'd say she hasn't been in the water long, but with the temperatures, the water preserves the body, so it could be longer. We're going to have to wait for the autopsy to get the full story. We'll have to see who saw her last, figure up a timeline from there."

"Who found her?"

"Two kids sneaking some pot. They saw her tangled in garbage near the shore and called it in. We've got impressions of the footprints around the water's edge, but I'm willing to bet this week's salary they belong to the kids who found the body. I've seen no other viable impressions outside of theirs."

Special Agent Ben Houston appeared at her right elbow and shook hands with both Mike and

Zachery. He looked shocked and angry, and hurting, she thought, and Mike wondered how close he'd been to Inspector York.

Zachery said, "Ben, give me your input on her, anything that could help us figure this out."

Mike saw he was trying to get it together, trying to clamp down on his anger, his grief. "Ben, yes, please," Mike said, "can you tell me about her? I need everything so I can start looking into her world."

Ben swallowed hard. "She's been with the Metropolitan Police in London her whole career. The people she was working with at the Met will have her personal details. I do know she thought her people were absolutely crazy for bringing the jewels out of the Tower of London."

Zachery said, "Was she doing anything hinky, anything to draw unwanted attention or make herself a victim? Any affairs? Pissed-off lovers?"

Ben shook his head. "She liked her job, did it to the best of her ability. Lovers, no, none I've heard about. She is—was—a really pretty girl, but very focused, very determined. She's a runner; she ran the upstate marathon with me last November when the New York Marathon was canceled. I got a calf cramp, and she insisted on staying with me. I ruined her time." He swallowed, turning to see the proce of her death in the medical examiner's van, idling quietly ten yards away. "She didn't drink, smoke, nothing to harm her innards, although she loved our American coffee. We had lunch and dinner a few times. She was a vegetarian. She was—well, fun to be with, and kind. Yes, she was kind. I can't imagine why anyone would kill her, it doesn't make sense. I mean, why? This—this is bad."

Zachery said, "So she was responsible for the safety of the crown jewels for the exhibit that's starting at the Met?"

Ben nodded. "She was sent here as a legal attaché to oversee the arrival, display, and departure of the *Jewel of the Lion* exhibit from London. She's been here about four months now. She's got a place over in Murray Hill, a rental." He stared at the rocky shoreline, and his jaw tightened. "Did you know the Brits are so protective of their crown jewels it took an act of Parliament to allow this exhibit to happen?"

Mike said, "An act of Parliament? So this exhibit is a pretty big deal. Ben, do you think whoever shot her could be an over-the-top Brit, really upset at the idea of the crown jewels coming to the U.S.?"

"Anything's possible, but murdering the minder to stop the exhibit, which it wouldn't? She had no say about the exhibit itself. Those issues were between the Met and the Brits and the insurance companies."

Zachery said, "I didn't know about the act of Parliament, either. I did know the Met was hosting this once-in-a-lifetime exhibit to coincide with Prince William and Duchess Kate's state trip here next week."

Ben said, "Yeah, it's been crazy with all the legal mumbo jumbo. The centerpiece of the exhibit is the queen mother's crown, which holds the Koh-i-Noor diamond, the Jewel of the Lion itself. The way they set up the transfer of the jewels to America technically keeps them on sovereign soil until they hit the floor of the Met. Elaine had a lot of pressure on her. The jewels have been in the museum for two days now. She was also in charge of the gala at the Met tomorrow night—wait, I guess we're talking tonight now, to debut the exhibit. Private affair. Very pricey. Elaine asked me if I—"

He trailed off, and Mike realized that Ben had been attending the gala as Elaine's guest. She touched her hand to his arm again. "I'm so sorry, Ben."

Anger sheened his eyes, and he swallowed. "I'll go back to Federal Plaza and put together as much information for you as I can so you can get briefed on her role and what—" It was as if Ben had run out of words. He stared at the sluggishly moving East River, cold and black beneath a sliver of moon.

The techs whistled and the medical examiner's van pulled away. They watched until the van was

out of sight, a silent tribute to their fallen comrade.

Zachery pulled his watch cap over his ears. “It’s too cold to stand out here much longer. Someone wanted the inspector out of the way. The question is why? It’s got to have something to do with the exhibit. Do you know what’s going to happen now, Ben, over the pond?”

Ben’s cop eyes were colder than the river. He said, “Scotland Yard has to assess what’s happened and how to react. As for the folks at the Met, I’ll speak to Dr. Browning, the curator of the exhibit, see what she’s going to do now that Inspector York is dead. The NYPD isn’t going to horn in on this, are they?”

Mike said, “I already spoke to Captain Slaughter of the Seventeenth Precinct. They’ll cooperate, anything we need. I promised to keep him in the loop, but he won’t interfere. This exhibit is important for the city; there’s tons of tourist dollars at stake. Adding a high-profile murder to its coverage? My feeling is NYPD will want to stay a continent away from this.”

Zachery breathed out a sigh of relief. “That’s good. Even though no one wants this kind of press attached to the big event at the Met, it’s going to blow up, you all know that. I’ve got to brief our media reps. They’ll want to think about how they’re going to spin it to the world.” He looked at his watch.

“Speaking of which, I’ve gotta run. I’ll be on my cell. If you need anything, text me. Keep me updated, Mike.” He nodded to Ben and strode off into the darkness, his shoulders not so straight now since the weight of Inspector York’s vicious murder was his responsibility to carry.

Mike huddled deeper in her jacket as a sudden blast of winter air whipped off the river. She wondered, yet again, *What did you find out, Elaine, that scared someone so badly they had to murder you?*

Over the Atlantic Ocean
British Airways Flight 117
Thursday, 9:00 a.m.

Nicholas barely made the 8:30 a.m. nonstop to New York. Flashing his Metropolitan Police credentials helped him jump the ridiculously long security line. Now he was on board and the plane was hurtling westward, the rows around him eerily empty.

The moment the flight attendants announced electronic devices were allowed, Nicholas had his laptop open and hooked into the plane's wireless system. First stop was his email. There were three messages from Penderley, subject lines increasingly angry. Nicholas had hoped for more time before Penderley found out where he was headed. He deleted the messages; they could duke it out later, after Nicholas was up to speed on Elaine's murder. Maybe.

An icon began flashing on his screen, a private instant message from his uncle, Bo Horsley, the American cowboy FBI agent Nicholas had spent his childhood idolizing. Now, as a man, and a law enforcement officer in his own right, Nicholas's respect for his uncle had only grown. Bo was one of the smartest men he knew, one of the best men he knew. He also excelled at bowling, a particular American pastime he'd tried to teach Nicholas as a boy. Nicholas remembered his bowling balls usually ended up in the gutter. Was that the right word? He shook his head. He felt relief seeing the instant message. Bo would understand his motive for coming, and would help.

Nicholas clicked on the instant message.

Dear Nick,

I'm so sorry about Elaine. As soon as you can, Skype me at this number. Try for secure, too, because we have a problem.

Love, Uncle Bo

More problems. Elaine's death wasn't enough? He felt the now familiar punch of grief, the hard emptiness of it, and turned it off. He'd never see her down another Guinness, leaving a foam mustache on her upper lip, never tease her again about her tarot card readings, a weekly mainstay in her life. All he could do was find out who'd killed her, and why. Since Penderley had told him, he'd sworn to her over and over he would. But it wouldn't bring her back.

He asked for a cup of tea from a redheaded flight attendant. His uncle Bo would smooth things between him and the FBI in New York so they'd let him work with them. He wondered when he got back to London if he'd still have a job with New Scotland Yard. He saw Penderley in his mind's eye demanding his execution. The way he felt right now, he simply didn't care.

He broke out his headphones, opened Skype, and dialed up Bo, who answered on the first ring. His face filled the screen, so similar to Nicholas's mother's. Bo looked tired. No, more than that, he looked beaten down.

“Nick, it’s good to see your face. I’m very sorry about your friend Elaine. She was smart and kind and worked well with all of us savage Americans. I remember she was wide-eyed at my office view of the city and the East River. I sent her right over to the Empire State Building to see the whole city. Everyone at the Met misses her.”

“Thank you, Uncle Bo. Elaine always wanted to travel to New York. She even spoke a couple of times of making a permanent move. She loved her time working there.” He paused, got hold of himself. “I can’t believe she’s really gone. Uncle Bo, do you know what she got herself into over there?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything about her murder yet, Nick. Unfortunately, this isn’t only about Elaine anymore. Like I messaged you, we got another problem. Are you secure?”

“Hold on a moment.” Nicholas tapped at the keyboard, and a program he’d written several years earlier, a simple and elegant mobile encryption, kicked in. He gave it a second to overwrite the public wireless system he was using.

“Uncle Bo, I forgot to tell you. I’m midway over the Atlantic on my way to you.”

Uncle Bo merely smiled at him. “Your mom called me, told me what happened, that you were on your way. No surprise. I knew you wouldn’t be content to wait in London. Now, how secure are you?”

“I’m as secure as I can be without hurting the plane’s radio integrity. I have the row to myself and no one’s behind me; not many people are traveling after the Christmas and New Year’s rush.”

“Understandable. Now, I’m not at the Met, Nick, I’m here in Chelsea with FBI agents Savich and Sherlock. They came to New York for two things, the gala tonight and to speak to a very convivial Russian art-loving mobster about a painting they think he stole. Savich, come front and center and meet my nephew.”

Nicholas knew the man’s face, had seen it in articles, in newspapers, on the Internet. It was a hard face, unsmiling at the moment. Who would imagine this big, muscular man was a computer genius? He had a swarthy complexion and cheekbones to cut ice, and nearly black eyes that could nail you to the spot. His dark hair looked damp, as though he hadn’t been long out of the shower. Nicholas decided Savich could face down both Nicholas’s grandfather and the Devil, and maybe win. No, not his grandfather, the old curmudgeon. He said, “I’ve heard a lot about you, Agent Savich. It’s a pleasure.”

Savich nodded at a man who could be his younger brother, and wasn’t that a kick? “And you’re Bo’s nephew. It’s good to meet you finally. This is my wife, Agent Lacey Sherlock.”

Nicholas looked into the face of a young woman with beautiful red curly hair, no, not really red, but for the life of him, he couldn’t place the color. Titian, maybe? White skin, summer blue eyes. It was like the Devil had captured his perfect opposite.

“A pleasure, Nicholas. Call me Sherlock, and let me tell you, Bo talks about you nonstop. He even claims you could be as good as Dillon in the next decade or so.”

Nicholas laughed. “It’s a pleasure to meet both of you.” And then he waited for Bo to tell him what was going on.

Bo leaned forward and said quietly, “We’re trying to keep this hush-hush for the moment. Both Savich and Sherlock are in on this, so you don’t have to hold anything back.” Bo took a deep breath. “Here’s the thing, Nick, the Koh-i-Noor diamond’s been stolen from the *Jewel of the Lion* exhibit.”

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