David

Back in the days of King Sargon the Great, the Oxford literary set coming for lunch and drinking my stock of premium wine dry would have provoked twelvefold retribution. Sadly, in today's world, it simply meant that I would have to drive to Waitrose tomorrow and fill the boot with replacement bottles of Cru Bourgeois and Château Musar at not inconsiderable expense. I would get the loyalty points, of course, but I am not sure that constitutes progress.

Still, these people were Phoebe's friends, we were newcomers and it was important that we made a good impression. So I would swallow my pride and play the devoted husband, putting out of my mind that I was Regius Professor of Archaeology at Oxford University, used to facing down international symposia of expert scientists and grilling overconfident post-docs on the methodology used in their research.

We live in a world of sacrifice and I can do my bit, same as the next man. I just wish I was doing it on another day, another week or preferably in a different millennium altogether.

With a sigh, I turned away from the window and looked back at the print-out on my desk. It was the latest transcription from the Fallujah Codex. And, if I am honest, it made no more sense than inviting the literary set for lunch. This was a mundane text about life five thousand years ago in dry and dusty Mesopotamia. It should contain details of leaking canals, notes saying that Labashi the baker owed seven shekels to Dipatusu the farmer and, if I was lucky, complaints that one of the local washer girls was ensorcelling upstanding men with her dark powers.

The new text, though, was more sinister altogether.

I read it over again.

THE DOG-HEADED DEMON WILL COME WITH THE WIND AND WREAK VENGEANCE ON THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE

Someone back in the mists of time was clearly up to no good. But who? And why? And what business had they telling me about it so long after the fact? These were not questions that a working archaeologist normally had to grapple with.

And lest there be any doubt, I am *not* Indiana Jones.

I scratched my ear thoughtfully.

The compiler software could have gone awry, naturally. And my laptop might have had a senior moment part way through the transcription. To be fair, it was so aged that it warranted a display case of its own in the Ashmolean Museum. But there was still something unsettling and frankly … *disturbing* about today's new text.

It had menace, bordering on malevolence. Like a demand from HMRC that the Royal Mail has delivered two months late.

Just then, a beam of sunshine cut through the low, grey clouds and drew my eyes back to the window. Over on Port Meadow, a group of cows were picked out by the light as if about to perform a dance routine. *Cows, the Moosical* perhaps, based on an original work by TS Eliot. In my mind's eye, I saw a fusion of Busby Berkeley and James Herriot with just a hint of the racier side of *Chicago*. The costumes and choreography would be a challenge, of course, and theatre floors would need strengthening before performances could begin. But the idea had *potential*.

In reality, tails kept swishing, one of the cows advanced toward a tasty patch of clover and the sun went behind the clouds again.

Downstairs, a door slammed.

Phoebe's voice rose up the stairwell. I couldn't make out her words, but the meaning was clear. Lunch had arrived.

A cork popped. Laughter followed.

I closed the laptop and got to my feet, stretching my arms. Whatever terrors awaited me at the dining table, I knew one thing. It was a regular Sunday in north Oxford, summer was here and there wasn't a dog-headed demon in sight.

Thank the goddess Ištar for small mercies.

Alex

The second hand of the clock completed another minute, meeting the number twelve and ploughing on past it for an additional sixty second dash. Nothing of note had happened in the previous minute, Chief Inspector Lovegrove reflected. Nor in the one before that. His expectations weren't high for the one to come. The minutes kept going by and turning out the same. It defied all the laws of probability.

He gazed into the corridor outside his office. The walls were shabby, the ceiling lights too bright and the lino floor inexplicably sticky. The fact that he had stopped noticing its tawdry state was proof, he knew, that he had become institutionalised, worn down by St Aldate's police station's Formica, scuffed metal corner posts and turgid green paint.

It didn't help that he had stopped enjoying the job years ago.

True, he still got a thrill from racing down the Abingdon Road, sirens blaring, simply to pass the traffic and make it to McDonald's in Botley Road a few minutes quicker. And there was the occasional flash of pleasure in policing a football match when a Swindon fan said a word too many and was taken down a shady alley to resist arrest properly. But the paperwork in between, the unconscious bias training and the endless videos explaining just what was lawful these days had sapped his will. He was built for the age before subservient, *nice* policing, when the job was about law and order, not cuddles and hugs.

Gene Hunt, come and get me, he thought. *I'm waiting.*

The turgid green wall paint stayed exactly the same.

The second hand continued its relentless progress.

His plea left unanswered.

Even the work was dull these days. DCI Lovegrove ran the murder squad, yes. But the murder squad in *Oxford*. A city of 165,000 people that managed four murders in a busy year. Midsomer would get through that in a single episode. Inspector Montalbano would think he was having a quiet week. The CSI team

wouldn't even bother turning up to work.

What could you honestly do with a city that only had four murders per year?

His mind strayed to a map of murders in Mediaeval Oxford that appeared a few years ago. Now, that was interesting. Corpses were strewn left, right and centre, with vitriolic disputes between University staff and townsfolk, ill-judged affairs, betrayals and failed business ventures driving their demises. Oxford's homicide rate had been five times higher than that of London then. A proper city, filled with people and passion and things that result from those two coming together.

For just *one* of those murders to be going on with…

David

'I've been very puzzled by this latest set of cylinder seals,' I began.

'Cylinder seals?' the Booker Prize-winning novelist asked.

He had startlingly bright blue eyes that nestled beneath rambunctious salt and pepper eyebrows.

'Yes, cylinder seals,' I explained, topping up his empty glass with red wine. We were on to a cheeky Barolo from the Waitrose Fine Wine range that had been on promotion last month. It was rather good, and was a perfect foil for Phoebe's classic vegetarian take on *boeuf Bourguignon*. 'Cuneiform texts are often recorded on small stone cylinders,' I continued. 'To read them, you roll the face of the cylinder over something soft, like a clay tablet. The British Museum has a rather lovely seal from four thousand years ago which was believed to show Adam and Eve sitting by a tree, complete with serpent lurking in the wings, though we now think that it depicts an Akkadian banquet.'

'Fascinating.'

He was, I realised, genuinely interested.

Or perhaps the wine was doing its magical work.

Either was fine.

'It used to be that we rolled each cylinder out by hand,' I said, 'which was exciting – revealing the contents one cylinder at a time. It was also slow. There is now scanner technology which reads and transcribes a cylinder in seconds, making a digital scan in the process.'

'And is it all Thoth begat child with his cousin and slayed his brother?'

I laughed gently.

'Far more often, it's taxation records and bills due. Like a random selection of receipts taken from someone's glove compartment and tipped on to a table, with an occasional hand-scribbled note dropped in to keep it interesting.'

'The boring minutiae of life before the modern world.'

'Yes, I suppose that is one way of describing my life's work,' I said, mulling

over his words.

I refilled my own glass and drew down a hefty tug of the ruby coloured wine. At least Waitrose understood me.

Alex

'Let's try this over from the beginning, shall we?' Chief Inspector Lovegrove said with forced patience into the telephone receiver. 'Do you have a dead body or not?'

A noise of assent came down the line.

'And would you normally expect to have a dead body in your possession on a Monday morning?' the Chief Inspector continued.

More sounds were audible on the other side. He looked up at the dirty white tile squares that formed the ceiling of his office.

'No, well, you might work in a mortuary, or a hospice, or an undertakers.' A short pause. 'Yes, people do those things. So now we've cleared that point up, let's assume you have come to the right place and this may indeed be a homicide.'

A brief exchange of words followed.

'Yes, I or one of my many colleagues will be coming out to you directly,' Lovegrove said, rubbing his brow with his right hand, eyes closed, as he spoke.

More words.

'No, we won't be bringing the full CSI van out today. Do you have incident tape?'

Words were exchanged.

'Blue and white rolls of tape that says "Police – do not cross" on it, or words to that effect. The tape might also be yellow and black, though blue and white is standard issue.'

An affirmation, followed by other sounds.

'Good. If it says "Do not enter", that's perfect. Wrap the car in incident tape. Make sure it's secure—'

Noise down the line.

'I mean that the doors and boot are closed.' He paused a moment. 'By all means put on your surgical gloves so that any fingerprints aren't disturbed. Good. And I will be out to you after I finish my coffee.'

He listened for a short time.

'No, *after* I finish it. I don't think he's going to get up and leave now, do you?' A Crimestoppers poster stared back at Chief Inspector Lovegrove from the insipidly green wall in front of him. 'I'm glad we can agree on that. Yes, I will be with you shortly. That's right, *after* I finish my coffee.'

For a minute after the line went quiet DCI Lovegrove sat with eyes closed, unmoving. Then he stood up and walked out the door. A polystyrene cup landed in the bin as he went, and the smallest hint of a smile played on his lips.

David

'You were very patient with him,' Phoebe said.

'He was showing an interest for once,' I replied.

'Still, I appreciate you making the effort.'

Phoebe had enveloped me in her soft, caressing arms. We were gazing out over the garden. A robin landed on the birdbath and drank water warily. Her cuddles were still one of the most reassuring things. Real nightmare banishers, even at my advanced age. Sunshine came through the French windows and lit up the floorboards by our feet.

'I was mildly impressed that he mentioned Thoth,' I said. 'Our Booker Prize winner has evidently been reading the captions in the Egyptian section of the Ashmolean Museum.'

'Perhaps he'll even make it to Assyria and Babylon one of these days.'

'Perhaps he will. They're your friends, not mine, Phoebe, but I appreciate that they are important to you.'

'It's just that we only moved here recently—'

'Two years now.'

'Two years is nothing in north Oxford,' Phoebe said. 'Time passes more slowly here. And I feel that they're beginning to accept me now.'

'So they should. Your novel has been the literary standout of the year.'

'Ah, that gets us into the difference between *old fiction* and *new fiction*.'

She kissed my neck softly.

'You don't mean old *money* and new *money*?' I said.

'No, definitely fiction. I may be doing well today, but with every passing year the perceived quality of writing is adjudged to have gone down. Like a currency that's devaluing. In the same way that people say it's easy to have a number one hit in the charts today, but the same thing was monstrously difficult in the Sixties. My novels are like perky new world wines, to be sipped circumspectly at someone else's dinner party, but certainly not to be savoured, or approved of in

any fashion. Anyway, I think they are starting to accept me now.'

'You're maturing into a good vintage.'

'I suppose I am.' She nuzzled my ear gently. 'Now when was the last time you and I indulged in a little private wine tasting?'

Alex

It was a murder. That was clear. But beyond that, there was little to say. It was so low key, and undeserving of attention as to almost defy the effort of recording that it had happened. The Primark of homicides.

'So, tell me, John,' DCI Lovegrove began, 'what am I looking at here?'

The forensic pathologist, Dr John Breckinridge, shrugged his shoulders. The pair were sitting in Breckinridge's office, in the Dunn School of Pathology, where Breckinridge worked. Breckinridge was wearing a smart, charcoal grey woollen suit, with narrow lapels and a russet orange silk knit tie. No lab coats or tatty tweed jackets here. He was sat behind a glass-topped desk, with a window overlooking the University Parks behind him. Lovegrove was positioned opposite Breckinridge and was struggling to find a comfortable position in the metal tube and black leather seat he had selected.

'Blunt object trauma to the head,' Breckinridge said. 'Then perhaps strangulation whilst the victim was still alive. After that I'm speculating.' He looked wistfully down at the report on his desk. 'No resistance, no attempt to fight back. As if he was reconciled to his death and was ready for it to happen.'

'Like some weird suicide pact?'

'No, nothing like that.' Breckinridge thought for a moment. 'As if he simply didn't have the will to live any more … or maybe that he had reached the end of his time and he welcomed the person who brought the end to it.'

'That *is* pretty weird.'

'Yes, I agree it's weird. A euthanasia vibe. I'm just puzzled.'

'Go on,' Lovegrove said. 'It sounds quite simple on face value. Someone bopped him on the head and then throttled him. There's nothing to suggest a motive. No attempted robbery. Nothing vindictive or unpleasant done to the body, the way there might be if it were revenge. No passion directed against the dead man. Simply a termination, in the style of an abattoir.'

'That is what is confusing me,' Breckinridge went on. 'The fellow has more

in common with a cow on the floor of a slaughterhouse after they've used the bolt gun. He doesn't strike me as being particularly … *human*.'

Lovegrove raised an eyebrow.

'Less than human?' he said.

'Not that. And I already feel bad about what I just said. But somehow he has managed to die without the dignity, rage or pride that you would expect a human to have.' His lips pursed. 'I've just literally never seen the like of it in my career.'

'Okay. Sounds like an odd one whichever way you slice it. When can I have the full autopsy report?'

'On your desk tomorrow.' Breckinridge pulled a face, presumably running through a mental list of the jobs he had to do and their relative complexities. 'There are still some tests I'd like to run. By eleven o'clock, I should think.'

'You're a good man. Thanks John.'

David

Long shadows lay across Port Meadow. Each of the horses I could see was attached to a patch of dark green that ran fully a hundred metres across the turf. Clumps of sedge spilled shadows taller than a man. This was the witching hour, when it felt like magical things could happen on the meadow. As if the dog walkers would return home blessed in some way by the spirit of the land, destined never to lead ordinary lives again.

I turned away from the window, back to the codex text in front of me and rubbed my eyes for a second time. The text made odd reading. 'The harvest of the innocents began | One was a man of taxes, Another a woman of grain | Then a man of learning and after that a woman of the spirits | With a priest it was done | And Ištar, first of the gods, lady of chaos, was pleased with the dog-headed man | The dog-headed man bared his teeth like an ūmu demon, his radiance glowing over the valley, and savoured the taste of blood'.

This was not what the Fallujah clay cylinders should be saying. These were routine pieces of writing, about as exciting as a note saying that the Westgate Library would close unexpectedly on Tuesday afternoon due to a problem with the drains and apologies for any inconvenience caused.

What puzzled me in particular was that the previous box of clay cylinders was exactly what I expected. I looked back at a typical text. 'Adad made his rain scarce,' it ran. 'Blocked below, it did not raise flood-water from the springs | The field decreased its yield | Nissabe turned away her breast | The dark fields became white.' And that was the bleak side of what was written, the real fire and brimstone end of the spectrum. These were the writings of farmers terrified that next year the waters would not come and they would have no food to feed their families with.

I turned to a different section of the codex. 'When the third year came | Their looks were changed by starvation | Their faces covered with scabs like malt | They went out in public hunched | Their well-set shoulders slouched | Their

upstanding bearing bowed'.

The words of practical people concerned with the daily challenge of living and survival. Of keeping their children from dying. Not with homicidal maniacs coming and whittling every second person from their number.

Something in what I was reading did not add up.

I was, if I'm honest, rather perturbed and in need of a second opinion, both on the texts and on my own state of mind. The White Horse pub beckoned at its earliest convenience.

Where better to hide than in plain sight?

That was the first idea that had entered his head and, now that he had turned it over and considered it, it made complete sense to him. He might just be the only person for whom the ridiculous assertion that 'homelessness was a lifestyle choice' was actually true.

He had bought a three season down sleeping bag from the 'upcycled' gear box at Decathlon and a lightweight one man tent. A waterproof rucksack that was reduced to clear in the sale area and a BioFoam sleeping mat completed his kit. Both tent and sleeping bag fitted comfortably inside the rucksack. It was now hanging in the branches of a particularly dense Weeping Blue Atlas cedar tree in St Gedz College's spacious grounds. The tent could be easily erected beneath the tree's branches after dark without being visible from the outside. It was perfect for the very discreet tourist.

He could shower at OWNS in St Clements if he was planning to fly under the radar, or walk down the Iffley Road to the university sports club and use the facilities there otherwise. He hadn't made his mind up which the right approach was yet.

Either way, he was now sitting in an oak panelled office that dated back to the sixteenth century, waiting for the Dean to finish an over-running meeting on planning permission for a proposed new student accommodation block. Out the window, he could see the Weeping Blue Atlas cedar tree in the College grounds that he now called home. It made him feel like he was calling on a neighbour … which in a way he was.

David

It had been a hard day of teaching, one of the last busy ones before Trinity term ended. There had been two tutorials and three taught lessons – one covering the class of a colleague as a last minute favour when he decided to scurry off to a conference with a very attractive, and brilliant, young lecturer from the Anthropology department. He owed me big time for covering *that*. The tutorials had been surprisingly stressful. Callaghan had not only failed to write his essay, but seemed entirely unfamiliar with the material. When I pressed him with – genuinely gentle – questions, he went to pieces and sat crying in the room. In the end, I sent the other tutees out early. Callaghan seemed to have something going on in his private life, though even after spending fifteen minutes listening to his incoherent comments in between the sobs, I had little idea what it was.

So now I was sitting in the White Horse, decompressing with a glass of Village Idiot beer in my hand. The dark, stained wood interior of the pub was slowly soothing my furrowed brow. Jeanette Michaelson, the Jack Dorsey Professor of Archaeology, came in then. Her wayward, curly blonde hair was being even less well-behaved than normal, in sharp contrast to her brown linen trouser suit, which struck an improbably prudent line between smart and approachable.

'Hello you,' she said. 'Is that table fully occupied by you and your pint,' she asked breezily, 'or is there room for one more at it?'

'Always room for you,' I said with a smile.

'Let me apprise myself of a drink and I will be over then. Do you need a drink yourself?'

'I am fine,' I said, holding the Village Idiot aloft.

'So, I saw your message about the dog-headed demon,' she said, a minute later, once she was seated across the table from me. 'I agree it sounded most unusual. Not at all what you would expect to find in the Fallujah cylinders.'

'Unusual, and simply blunt,' I said. 'Of course, passages of Gilgamesh are

blood-thirsty and murderous. Literally the kind of thing to give nightmares to the unsuspecting. But all I was expecting from those particular cylinders was a verification and cataloguing task.'

She took a thoughtful sip of her dry white wine.

'Might they have got mixed up with another tray when they left the Iraq Museum, back in 2003?' she said. 'That was a God-awful mess.'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I was amazed that we managed to retrieve anything at all after the museum was looted. What a tragedy that was.'

'Yes, the Warka Vase disappeared, Bassetki Statue gone, Harp of Ur destroyed for the gold inlay. Some of them may have been recovered since. But the sort of day that makes your heart sink.'

She sighed heavily.

'I did talk to Dr Jawad about provenance when we took these particular cylinder seals and clay cylinders for safe keeping,' I went on. 'He was adamant that the looters hadn't reached that part of the archive.' I reflected for a moment. 'Which is hardly surprising. The looters knew exactly what the big ticket exhibits in the collection were and cleared those out on the first day. They sold those to foreign collectors over the internet, demonstrating a degree of entrepreneurial skill that I wouldn't have credited them with. A few old cylinders were of no interest to them.'

'So Jawad was confident that no interference had taken place?' Jeanette asked.

'Absolutely,' I said. 'I've sent him an e-mail to double check, but with the regular power outages over there, I'm not holding my breath on a speedy answer.'

'It is bizarre,' she said slowly. 'If I didn't know what the source was, I would say that your cylinder sounds like a curse text from the time of Naram-Sin, when Akkad was over-reaching itself and on the verge of collapsing into hubris and self-destruction.'

'Yes, but that was three hundred years and a hundred kilometres from where these cylinders were found.'

'It's a mystery,' she said simply.

'And it's *cylinders*,' I continued. 'I am on to a clay cylinder from the same

source now, which scores even higher for blood curdling.'

'How very spooky.'

'The thing it reminds me of is those codexes from Ghent, back in the Sixties,' I said, adding hurriedly, 'although of course that's an absurd thing to say.'

'What, the Nabonidus Codex? The one that was supposed to curse everyone who read it?' Jeanette's eyebrows were up close to the low beams of the pub's ceiling. 'Four people dead inside a week? All shades of Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon? You of all people are the last person I would expect to believe in that mumbo-jumbo.'

'It's just that … odd things *did* happen to the people in Ghent who read the codex.'

'David, are you serious? You are as level-headed as they come. Nothing happened to the people in Ghent, other than them getting a bit hysterical.'

'People died.'

'People die all the time. People died in Ghent who had no connection to the Nabonidus Codex and some archaeologists who should have known better allowed themselves to get an almighty wind up.'

'More than that happened. *Something* happened. I read about it online.'

'And Elvis is alive and the Moon landings never took place.' She looked at me as if I had gone simple. 'David, is this for real?'

'I don't know what it is,' I said. 'Something about these texts has got right under my skin.'

'Wonders never cease. The sober and stolid Professor David Crossland believing in the kind of fairy stories I would ridicule my undergraduates for retelling! I'm astonished.'

'You and me both.'

'Well, if that's where you are, you and I have more important matters to discuss. Now, pressing questions first. What beer are you drinking? This is going to take several pints to set right.'

Lovegrove & McGrath

'Oh, so you *are* working today,' DS Fionnuala McGrath said to Chief Inspector Lovegrove.

She was wearing olive green canvas trousers, a powder blue blouse and a brown quilted gilet which had useful pockets for carrying plasticuffs, paracetamol, Juicy Fruit chewing gum and other paraphernalia of a modern policewoman. She exuded an air of healthfulness. Her wiry black hair was tied back, her cheeks were dappled with light brown freckles and her eyes twinkled under the LED lights. Her Irish brogue also gave her what she thought was – and sometimes actually was – a Get Out of Jail Free card for times when she misread the room and made a comment that was just a *little* too pointed for present company.

'Sarcasm will get you precisely nowhere, Sergeant,' Lovegrove said, suppressing a smile.

'Point noted chief.'

'In fact I take that back. Sarcasm will get you seconded to Section 2 for the week, where they are crying out for volunteers to help them inventory and index their paper filing cabinets after the Thames Valley mainframe inadvertently deleted all their records over the weekend.'

'Naturally, I am the volunteering kind, sir,' Fionnuala continued, 'but regrettably I have pressing and essential work to do here for the department, right here in the homicide squad.'

'It's the murder squad,' Lovegrove said automatically. 'And that statement may be less true than you think.'

'No, really I do, sir.'

DS McGrath's hand appeared from behind her back and she held out a brown A4 envelope.

'That appears to be addressed to me,' Lovegrove said dryly.

'So it is, sir,' she said, looking at the printed letters on the envelope's front.

'Unless of course you want me to take it down to Section 2 instead when I go to help them?'

'Much as I would like to send you down to the dank, forgotten dungeon that is Section 2, hand it over.'

He took the envelope without further comment, shaking his head, and tore it open. Lovegrove spent two minutes silently reading the contents.

'Are you still here?' he said, his eyes rising back up to meet those of DS McGrath.

'I am, sir. I was wondering if that was the pathologist's report.'

'It is,' Lovegrove said, glancing down at the report in his hand. 'The whole gruesome story of the John Radcliffe Hospital carpark murder.'

'Of course, he may not *actually* have been murdered in the carpark.'

'Needn't he?'

'No. I'm just saying that he could have been killed somewhere else and driven to the carpark.'

'Well, ten out of ten for intuition. The pathologist agrees with you. He thinks the victim was murdered offsite, perhaps in a busy carpark or a layby with woodland nearby, and moved *post mortem*.'

'Bingo.'

'He also says that the initial blow didn't kill the victim. It merely stunned our Mr Conigsby. Neither did the strangulation. The cause of death was—'

Lovegrove's eyes were suddenly looking beyond DS McGrath, over her shoulder and at the figure standing in the doorway behind her.

'What is it, Jones?' he said.

'The Chief Constable on the phone, sir. Line 2.'

'Put her through then.'

After a few pleasantries, Lovegrove listened for a minute and a half. He then said the single word, 'Right,' and hung up. He gazed absently out into the corridor, seemingly absorbed by the turgid green paint.

'What was, sir, if you don't mind me asking?' DS McGrath said.

'What was what?'

Lovegrove blinked at DS McGrath.

'The cause of death, sir?'

'He had a knitting needle inserted into the base of his skull. Not just once, but six times. Somebody wasn't taking any chances.'

Silence filled the air momentarily.

'It was definitely a murder, then,' Fionnuala added flatly. 'Killing someone with a knitting needle in a carpark or a lay-by – that's next level.'

'I should say so,' Lovegrove agreed, rising out of his chair. 'Come on,' he continued. 'You and I are going for a car ride.'

'So wonderful to see you,' the Dean of St Gedeminas College said, leaning forward to shake his hand. 'When did you get back in the old country?'

'Oh, a few months ago now,' the man said.

The Dean, Nigel Jacob CBE, sat back and looked at the person seated opposite him. They made an odd pair. The Dean in a noisy brown tweed jacket and similarly toned, but mismatched, trousers. The man's outfit more functional, like Bear Grylls on Dress Down Friday.

'The last I heard you were in New Zealand,' the Dean said.

'Ah, yes, New Zealand. That was rather a … special *trip.'*

'I should say so.'

'And surprisingly successful. It worked out better than I would ever have hoped.'

'You may be the only one who was surprised. Those of us in the know never had any doubts.'

'I had doubts enough for everyone.'

He smiled sheepishly, like an undergraduate who has been put up for a scholarship.

'Will you want to be staying in College while you're here?' the Dean asked, his face turning more serious and business-like.

'No, I'm putting up with a friend,' the man said. 'It's basic, but does me fine.'

'You know there's a room here if you want it.'

'Thanks. I appreciate that.'

'And now only five days to the Jubilee. It's hard to believe it's come round so soon.'

'Five days … and so much still to do.'

'Do you have everything under control? I could dig up a pair of hands easily enough if you need support.'

'I think I need to do this on my own,' the man said with a laugh. 'The offer is appreciated.'

'And will remain open. Don't hesitate to say if you change your mind.'

'I will. Thanks.'

'And is there anything else I can do to help?'

'Nothing. Really. I am on top of the whole lot.'

'Five days will go in the blink of an eye.'

'It will,' the man said, eyes twinkling. 'And the Jubilee will be the days of days when it comes.'

David, Jen

'Jeanette?' I said into my phone. 'Glad I caught you. Got a moment to talk?'

'I have two moments,' she replied. 'I need to be out the door by 9.57am at the latest.'

'Good. Then I'll be quick. I've transcribed the next cylinder. And it includes a cuneiform character I've not seen before. Can I send it over to you for a look?'

'Sure. That's one moment gone.'

I hesitated, unsure how to phrase what I wanted to say next.

'The second moment has almost gone as well,' Jeanette Michaelson added.

'Even without the missing word, I'm puzzled by the message,' I said. Sunshine suddenly flooded through the window, lighting up my desk. 'Puzzled, and more than a little disturbed. I wonder if you—'

'Absolutely. Send it over. I'll look at it and give answers on a postcard. Now, I am gone.'

The line went dead.

Alex, Fionnuala

'What were you up to this morning?' DS McGrath asked.

Lovegrove couldn't see the expression on her face as she spoke, as he was driving the BMW 530 along the High Street and scrupulously trying to observe the 20 MPH speed limit. It wasn't clear to him if the question was born of genuine interest or whether sly mockery was lurking behind it.

'What business is it of yours?' he said.

'Just curious. And talking is more interesting than driving in silence to the JR.'

'If you really want to know, I went to my class.'

'And what class might that be on a weekday morning?'

He slowed the car down for the red traffic light at the junction with Longwall Street and gave his passenger a sideways glance.

'Am I talking to you now, McGrath, or the entire department?' Lovegrove said.

'Just me.'

'Because if I hear this back from anyone else, you are dead to me.'

'Girl Guide's honour. Just me here, sir.'

Lovegrove eased the car forward and accelerated toward Magdalen Bridge. He kept his speed low, as a cluster of bicycles were scattered across the left hand side of the lane.

'I was doing ballet,' he said.

'Ballet, like Billy Elliot?'

'So far, it has been more like Billy Bremner, if I am being completely candid. I am not as supple as I used to be.'

'But you were at a ballet class this morning?'

'I was. My doctor has suggested … more than suggested in fact that, given the sedentary occupation I have, and my age and blood pressure, I should take up a physical activity.'

'I imagine that half an hour's ballet first thing in the morning is more than physical.'

'It is indeed, sergeant. I am discovering aches in muscles that I didn't know I had when I joined the Force. And I mean it, if I ever hear a word—'

'Your secret is safe with me.' McGrath was quiet as the BMW passed along St Clements and began the ascent of Headington Hill. 'So what ballet are you doing?'

'Romeo and Juliet.'

'Oh, I love that. The Prokofiev with all the grand, sweeping music. And you are dancing who exactly?'

'Well, there are twelve women of a certain maturity in the class and I am the sole representative of my gender—'

'—so you're playing Romeo! Oh, this is priceless. Sir.'

'It may be. I have taken on the role on a provisional basis, subject to me seeing how it evolves.'

'But the short version is that you will be Romeo.'

'Yes. If I survive long enough to get to the performance. Not only I am less supple, Juliet seems to be more *robust* than she may have been at sixteen. Anyway, here's the turning.'

Lovegrove flicked his left indicator on.

'Just what it is we are doing at the JR hospital?' McGrath asked.

'Not what, but who.'

'Your doctor hasn't referred you here for a second opinion on your ballet dancing?' DS McGrath said, a grin spreading across her features. 'Because if she has, I would definitely like to sit in as the official note taker.'

'Calm your febrile mind, sergeant. This is purely work. You and I are going to talk to someone who witnessed the murder vehicle being parked last week.'

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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