

## CHAPTER 1

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### THE CALL

“Campbell asked you to ring Greed & Mayhem ASAP.” Joan shouted along the long corridor from her receptionist’s tiny office to Julia’s panelled room.

“You mean Reid & McHalm?” Julia had noticed the matter-of-fact tone in Joan’s voice.

“I thought Campbell said Greed & Mayhem. Sorry.”

“It’s fine, Joan. Will do,” said Julia in her soothing voice. “Joan was new to the office, but she would get used to Campbell’s feeble puns,” she thought.

Thursday is sale day at Hillman Roberts and porters were busy preparing the auction hall for the usual invasion of dealers, chancers, and pensioners all looking for a bargain.

Julia hated Thursdays and was glad that she was not involved in the organized chaos of the weekly auction of household items and curios – the detritus of cleared houses and de-cluttering efforts. As a specialist in Oriental antiques her job was to seek out, value, and possibly bring to auction the bewildering array of Japanese and Chinese works of art that have mysteriously managed to end up in Scottish homes, from two-bedroom bungalows to stately mansions.

As Reid and McHalm were the solicitors who dealt with the upper end of the market, aristocrats, pseudo-aristocrats, bankers, and minor celebrities, she was not going to ignore Campbell’s message, in spite of the pressing matter of rescheduling her appointment with the dentist.

“This is Julia Flowers from Hillman Roberts the auctioneers, I understand Alistair Reid is trying to reach me” – the receptionist put her through immediately.

“Julia! Long time no see. How are you? I heard you have succumbed to the lure of the East Neuk,” said Alistair in his captivating tone, proceeding

without a pause to the business in hand, “we need you for a rather delicate job.”

“Always happy to oblige, if I can,” replied Julia, knowing that the details of her recent move to a seaside village near St Andrews would be of no interest to Alistair Reid.

“Do you remember the insurance valuation you did for us quite some time ago for the property at 55 Heriot Row?” asked Alistair, expecting an immediate positive response.

“Not off hand. What was the name of the client?”

“Dr Anthony Gordon, the late Dr Anthony Gordon,” stated Alistair, as if to settle the issue conclusively.

“Yes, of course. How could I forget? A most beautiful pair of Doucai bowls,” replied Julia, regretting instantly her enthusiasm as she recalled the gruesome end of Dr Gordon’s life.

Alistair Reid carried on unfazed: “Well, we need a valuation for probate now and,” before Julia could ask what was delicate about it, “the *pòlis* may be involved.”

Julia did not take on board the gist of Alistair’s request as she was disorientated by the Glaswegian accent Alistair has used to pronounce “police”, with an exaggerated emphasis on the first syllable – most uncharacteristic of Alistair Reid’s cut-glass Edinburgh voice.

“The police?” repeated Julia, with the accent in the right place.

“Of course, you must remember Dr Gordon’s murder. It was in every newspaper for days,” said Alistair Reid.

“Yes, yes,” Julia had recovered her composure, “it was horrendous. But why would the police be interested in a valuation? Are there problems with the inheritance?”

“No, no. No pushy heirs. No heirs at all, in fact. It is more delicate than that. And, to be precise, it is not the police as such that is interested. It’s one single policeman.” Alistair Reid could not hide a hint of disapproval in his voice, “Detective Bland.”

“Isn’t it an old case? It must have been a couple of years ago. Is Detective Bland interested in the contents of the house?” Julia felt uneasy about the whole conversation.

“All I am saying is that a Detective Bland may be in touch with you. I myself do not know why. Are you free sometime next week?” Alistair Reid was obviously keen to put an end to the awkward conversation.

“Let me just check my diary. Will have to be next Friday. Say 2pm?” Julia did not work on Fridays as a rule, but her diary was full for the rest of the week and she was not in the mood to negotiate about dates with Alistair Reid.

“Yes, excellent,” Alistair Reid was glad his gambit had paid off, “Sue will get the keys to you. Usual terms. Thank you, Julia.” And with that he transferred the call back to the receptionist.

Julia was left wondering what the heck was going on, but, being the curious sort, she immediately googled “Dr Anthony Gordon + murder + Detective Bland”. Far fewer hits than she was expecting appeared on the screen. Just a quick skim of the newspaper clippings was enough to remind her of the gist of the case: “*Reclusive Former Diplomat Found With Skull Smashed In Botched Burglary*”. Not much on Detective Bland, just a few photos with him standing next to the Chief Superintendent. “Not a memorable face,” thought Julia, “good for tailing people undetected.” She tried to stop herself from having a private joke along the lines “Bland by name, bland by face”, but the fact was that as soon as the photos disappeared from the screen, she could not recall any of Detective Bland’s features. And she was *good* at faces!

Joan came in to Julia’s office with the 55 Heriot Row valuation. For some reason there was no file on the Hillman Roberts’ server, but Joan had managed to find a ten-year old paper copy. As soon as Julia started leafing through the pages, her photographic memory brought all the contents of 55 Heriot Row back to life. She remembered how neatly displayed everything was and how glad she had been at the time for being able to value all the items without the hindrance of the owner following her with a running commentary on each piece to be valued. After twenty-five years in the business she should have got used to customers trying either to hype the value of items to be insured or to undervalue anything left in a will, but she still found their “help” an irritation and a waste of time.

Alan M.A. Friedmann

“As I never even met Dr Gordon, Detective Bland cannot possibly be interested in me as a witness, only in the valuation,” thought Julia, relieved not a little.