

CHAPTER ONE

Marcus Blake leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the desk and thought about the year that had flown by since Afghanistan. His ramshackle security agency had not improved much in that year. He had taken on a secretary, a young widow by the name of Vereen who had a four year old son, and the only acquisition that could be said to have improved the business. Vereen worked for three days each week; anymore would have meant losing her benefits.

Of those who had applied for the job, Marcus liked Vereen the most. There were few takers, considering the hours and the meagre pay, but she fitted the bill, had the necessary personal skills and wanted an opportunity to keep in touch with workday routines. Her mother was Jamaican, her father English and she lived near them on a council estate in South London.

Vereen opened the door and walked in. She dropped a folder on his desk.

‘You got a phone call this morning.’

Marcus took his feet off the desk. ‘Who was it?’

‘Sir Giles Cavendish, whoever that is. You moving in posh circles now?’

Marcus felt an inward groan surfacing; any interest from Cavendish could not be good news. ‘Sometimes I wish I wasn’t,’ he admitted. ‘What did he want?’

‘He wants to see you, said he’d be here about now.’

Marcus grunted and looked at his watch.

‘Who is he?’ Vereen asked. ‘An old client?’

Marcus thought of Afghanistan again and missile attacks, drugs, child smuggling and killing dear friends.

‘You could say that,’ he said after a while. ‘Make yourself scarce when he comes, Vereen. If I need you, I’ll give you a shout.’

One other improvement to the agency during the previous twelve months was the purchase of a room next to his office. Although Marcus did not need money, the fee paid by Her Majesty’s government for his services in Afghanistan had been handsome; it was enough to buy a fair chunk of prime real estate in the city. But all he wanted, or needed, was to double the size of his agency. Vereen used it as an office, but it was really a repository for anything Marcus didn’t want or didn’t know what to do with.

They both heard the door downstairs open and the creak of the first footfall on the carpeted staircase leading up to Marcus’s agency. Vereen raised her eyebrows at him and walked over to the door. She pulled it open as Sir Giles Cavendish reached the top step. He smiled and Vereen stepped aside as he brushed past her. Marcus got to his feet and held his hand out over the desk.

‘Sir Giles, how good to see you,’ he lied.

Cavendish nodded and shook the outstretched hand. He was a tall, cadaverous looking man. A gaunt face peered solemnly from beneath a scalp peppered with age. There was little colour in his face, and his height was diminished by a slight stoop. Marcus noticed this and was surprised at the appearance of a man who once held himself so elegantly, and always with a purpose.

‘Can I get you something?’

‘Tea would be nice. Black, two sugars.’ He sat down in the chair facing the desk.

Marcus looked over at Vereen who smiled and closed the door behind her.

‘Pretty girl,’ Cavendish observed, and looked back at Marcus.

‘So,’ Marcus said, spreading his hands and ignoring Cavendish’s comment about Vereen. ‘How can I help you, Sir Giles?’

‘You had a client some time ago,’ he began. ‘Chap by the name of Eddie Garfield.’

'How on earth did you know that?' Before Cavendish could answer, Marcus put his hand up. 'Never mind. Why do you ask?'

'You knew what he was?'

'A Cabinet minister?'

Cavendish nodded. 'A junior minister. Well, Culture Secretary. But you must have known that.'

Marcus did, but Garfield had insisted on absolute secrecy, so Marcus tried bravely to treat the man as a member of the public rather than a member of the government. A thought drifted into his mind, but he couldn't hold it.

'Are you still with MI6, Sir Giles?' Marcus asked.

'Don't change the subject, Blake, but yes, I am.'

'So why is MI6 interested in a client of mine? Surely it would have to be MI5 in this case if there's a problem.'

'Who said there was a problem?'

Marcus laughed. 'You haven't come here to pass the time of day, Sir Giles. We both know that, don't we?'

'He died.'

Marcus knew that. 'Yes, very sad. And it meant I'd lost a client, but that was a few months ago.'

'Do you know how he died?'

Marcus nodded. He recalled the headlines in the national press about the budding politician's death. 'He had cancer.'

'Yes.' The word was uttered slowly. 'Were you aware he was ill?'

Marcus shook his head. 'Clients don't come here to talk about their medical problems. If he was ill, he didn't show it.'

There was a gentle knock on the door and Vereen came in carrying a tray with Cavendish's tea. She placed it carefully on the desk and left the two men alone. Cavendish took a sip of his tea. He turned his head and looked around the room.

'I nearly lost my life here. If it hadn't been for you....' He let it drift. Marcus tried not to think what could have happened if he hadn't acted so quickly.

'Is your life in danger now?' he asked.

Cavendish leaned forward and put his cup down, shaking his head vigorously. 'Goodness me no, unless you're thinking of London traffic.'

The old boy still had a dry sense of humour, but Marcus thought he was prevaricating, hedging a little. He seemed reluctant to come to the point.

'So, no real challenges in MI6 for you now?'

Cavendish chuckled. 'There are always challenges, but I spend much of my time in the Tate or the National Gallery these days. I can quite happily get lost in them.'

'But that isn't why you are here, or did you just want somewhere else to while away your time?'

Cavendish picked up his cup. 'No, that's not the reason.' The cup went down again. 'You said Garfield died of cancer, right?'

'It's what I read in the paper.'

'No; the truth is he committed suicide.'

Marcus's reaction was perfectly natural: his head went back and he raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'Suicide? I don't remember reading that.'

Cavendish shook his head. 'You wouldn't have done; it was hushed up. More to protect his family, I would think. But Garfield was not the suicidal type; he had so much to live for, a promising career. Probably would have made Prime Minister; he was certainly equipped for it.'

‘But who is the suicidal type? And what makes you say that, anyway?’

‘He left a suicide note.’

Traffic noise percolated through the window, encroaching on the silence that followed Cavendish’s surprise admission. The two men stared at each other. Cavendish picked up his cup and sipped his tea. Marcus looked a little puzzled; the vague thought he had earlier slipped in and out again, too rapid to hold on to it.

‘That does rather confirm it, though, doesn’t it?’ he said, letting the thought drift away.

Cavendish put his cup down in the manner of someone about to make a statement. ‘According to the suicide note, he was so ashamed of his involvement with a fifteen year old boy that he decided to take his own life.’

‘Which you don’t believe, do you?’

Cavendish went on. ‘Garfield was in the public eye virtually twenty four hours every day. His position as a cabinet minister meant he was under close and covert surveillance by the Secret Service. His wife said the confession was absolute nonsense; there wasn’t a shred of truth in it.’

‘Perhaps she was in denial; after all, it must have been awful for her. It was bad enough losing a husband in that way, but to know he was a homosexual too. And with an under-age youth it would have meant he would be labelled as a paedophile.’ He left it hanging.

‘Sounds like an unmitigated disaster, which is why it was hushed up.’

‘But you’re not happy with it.’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

‘I said that the truth was he committed suicide. But I don’t think that’s the case; I believe he was murdered.’

