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Over My Dead Body



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CHAPTER 1

'Are you a detective, sir?'

William looked up at the young man who'd asked the question. 'No, I'm the assistant manager of the Midland Bank in Shoreham, Kent.'

'In that case,' continued the young man, not looking convinced, 'you'll be able to tell me what the exchange rate was between the dollar and the pound when the currency market opened this morning.'

William tried to recall how much he'd received when he changed a hundred pounds into dollars just before he joined the ship the previous evening, but he hesitated for too long.

'One dollar and fifty-four cents to the pound,' said the young man, before he could reply. 'So, forgive me for asking, sir, why aren't you willing to admit you're a detective?'

William put the book he was reading on the table in front of him and took a closer look at the earnest young American,

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who seemed desperate not to be thought of as a child, although he hadn't started shaving. The word 'preppy' immediately came to mind.

'Can you keep a secret?' he whispered.

'Yes, of course,' the young man said, sounding offended.

'Then have a seat,' said William, pointing to the comfortable chair opposite him. He waited for the young man to settle. 'I'm on holiday and I promised my wife that for the next ten days, I wouldn't tell anyone I was a detective, because it's always followed by a stream of questions that turn it into a busman's holiday.'

'But why choose a banker as your cover?' asked the young man. 'Because I have a feeling you wouldn't know the difference between a spreadsheet and a balance sheet.'

'My wife and I gave that question some considerable thought before we settled on a banker. I grew up in Shoreham, a small town in England, in the sixties, and the local bank manager was a friend of my father's. So I thought I'd get away with it for a couple of weeks.'

'What else was on the shortlist?'

'Estate agent, car salesman and funeral director, all of which we were fairly confident wouldn't be followed by never-ending questions.'

The young man laughed.

'Which job would you have chosen?' asked William, trying to regain the initiative.

'Hitman. That way no one would have bothered me with any follow-up questions.'

'I would have known that was a cover immediately,' said William with a dismissive wave of his hand, 'because no

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hitman would have asked me if I was a detective. He would have already known. So, what do you really do when you're not a hitman?'

'I'm in my final year at Choate, a prep school in Connecticut.'

'Do you know what you want to do when you leave school? That's assuming you're not still hoping to be a hitman.'

'I shall go to Harvard and study history, before going on to law school.'

'After which, no doubt, you'll join a well-known legal practice, and in no time be made a junior partner.'

'No, sir, I want to be a lawman. After I've spent a year as editor of the *Law Review*, I shall join the FBI.'

'You seem to have your career well mapped out, for one so young.'

The young man frowned, clearly offended, so William quickly added, 'I was just the same at your age. I knew I wanted to be a detective and end up at Scotland Yard when I was eight years old.'

'What took you so long?'

William smiled at the bright young man, who no doubt understood the meaning of the word precocious without realizing it might apply to him. But then William accepted that he'd undoubtedly suffered from the same problem when he was a schoolboy. He leant forward, thrust out his hand and said, 'Detective Chief Inspector William Warwick.'

'James Buchanan,' replied the young man, shaking William's outstretched hand firmly. 'Dare I ask how you reached such a high rank, because if you were at school in the sixties you can't be more than . . .'

'What makes you so sure they'll offer you a place at

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Harvard?' asked William, trying to parry his thrust. 'You can't be more than . . .'

'Seventeen,' said James. 'I'm top of my class with a grade point average of 4.8, and I'm confident I'll do well in my SATs.' He paused before adding, 'Should I presume you made it to Scotland Yard, Chief Inspector?'

'Yes,' William came back. He was used to being interrogated by leading counsel, not teenagers, although he was enjoying the encounter. 'But if you're that bright, why haven't you considered becoming a lawyer, or going into politics?'

'There are far too many lawyers in America,' said James with a shrug of the shoulders, 'and most of them end up chasing ambulances.'

'And politics?'

'I wouldn't be any good at suffering fools gladly, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life at the whim of the electorate or allowing focus groups to dictate my opinions.'

'Whereas, if you were to become the Director of the FBI . . .'

'I would be my own master, answering only to the President, and I wouldn't always let him know what I was up to.'

William laughed at the young man, who clearly didn't suffer from self-doubt.

'And you, sir,' said James, sounding more relaxed, 'are you destined to become the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police?' William hesitated again. 'Clearly, you think it's a possibility,' James continued before he could reply. 'May I ask you another question?'

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'I can't imagine what would stop you.'

'What do you consider are the most important qualities needed to be a first-class detective?'

William gave the question some thought before he responded. 'A natural curiosity,' he eventually said. 'So you immediately spot something that doesn't feel quite right.'

James took a pen from an inside pocket and began writing William's words down on the back of the *Alden Daily News*.

'You must also be able to ask the relevant questions of suspects, witnesses and colleagues. Avoid making assumptions. And above all, you have to be patient. Which is why women often make better police officers than men. Finally, you must be able to use all your senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.'

'I'm not sure I fully understand,' said James.

'That must be a first,' William replied, immediately regretting his words, although the young man laughed for the first time. 'Close your eyes,' said William. He waited for a moment before saying, 'Describe me.'

The young man took his time before replying. 'You're thirty, thirty-five at most, a shade over six foot, fair hair, blue eyes, around a hundred and seventy pounds, fit, but not as fit as you used to be, and you've suffered a serious shoulder injury at some time in the past.'

'What makes you think I'm not as fit as I used to be?' said William defensively.

'You're about six or seven pounds overweight, and, as this is the first day of the voyage, you can't blame the never-ending meals they serve on board ships.'

William frowned. 'And the injury?'

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'The top two buttons of your shirt are undone, and when you leant forward to shake hands, I noticed a faded scar just below your left shoulder.'

William thought as he so often did, about his mentor, Constable Fred Yates, who had saved his life only to sacrifice his own. Police work wasn't always as romantic as some authors would have you believe. He moved quickly on. 'What book am I reading?'

'*Watership Down* by Richard Adams. And before you ask, you're on page hundred and forty-three.'

'And my clothes, what do they tell you?'

'I admit,' said James, 'I found that a bit of a mystery. It would take me several subtle questions before I came up with an answer, and then only if you told the truth.'

'Let's assume I'm a criminal who won't answer your questions until I've phoned my legal representative.'

James hesitated for a moment before he said, 'That in itself would be a clue.'

'Why?'

'It would suggest you've been in trouble with the law before, and if you know the telephone number of your lawyer, you certainly have.'

'OK. Let's assume I don't have a lawyer, but I've watched enough TV programmes to know I needn't answer any of your questions. What have you been able to work out without asking me any questions?'

'Your clothes aren't expensive, probably bought off the rack, yet you're travelling first class.'

'What do you deduce from that?'

'You're wearing a wedding ring, so you could have a rich wife. Or perhaps you're on a special assignment.'

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'Neither,' said William. 'That's where observation ends, and detection begins. But not bad.'

The young man opened his eyes and smiled. 'My turn, I think, sir. Please close your eyes.'

William looked surprised, but continued with the game.

'Describe me.'

'Bright, self-assured, but insecure.'

'Insecure?'

'You may be top of the class, but you're still desperate to impress.'

'What am I wearing?' asked James.

'A white button-down cotton shirt, possibly Brooks Brothers. Dark blue shorts, white cotton socks and Puma trainers, though you rarely, if ever, visit a gym.'

'How can you be sure of that?'

'I noticed when you walked towards me that your feet were splayed. If you were an athlete, they'd be in a straight line. If you doubt me, check the footprints of an Olympic runner on a cinder track.'

'Any distinguishing marks?'

'You have a tiny birthmark just below your left ear that you've tried to hide by growing your hair, although that will have to be cut short when you join the FBI.'

'Describe the picture behind me.'

'A black and white photo of this ship, the *Alden*, sailing out of New York harbour on May twenty-third, 1977. It's being accompanied by a flotilla, which suggests it was on its maiden voyage.'

'Why's it named the *Alden*?'

'That isn't a test of observation,' said William, 'but of knowledge. If I needed to know the answer to that question,

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I could always find out later. First impressions are often misleading, so assume nothing. But if I had to guess, and you shouldn't as a detective, as this ship is part of the Pilgrim Line, I'd say that Alden was the name of one of the original pilgrims who set sail from Plymouth to America on the *Mayflower* in 1620.'

'How tall am I?'

'You're an inch shorter than me, but you'll end up an inch taller. You weigh around a hundred and forty pounds, and you've only just started to shave.'

'How many people have passed us while your eyes have been closed?'

'A mother with two children, one a little boy called Bobby, both American, and a moment later one of the ship's officers.'

'How do you know he was an officer?'

'A deckhand passing the other way called him sir. There was also an elderly gentleman.'

'How could you tell he was old?'

'He was using a walking stick, and it was some time before the sound of tapping faded.'

'I'm half blind,' said James, as William opened his eyes.

'Far from it,' said William. 'Now it's my turn to ask the suspect some questions.' James sat bolt upright, a look of concentration on his face. 'A good detective should always rely on facts and never take anything for granted, so first I have to find out if Fraser Buchanan, the chairman of the Pilgrim Line, is your grandfather?'

'Yes, he is. And my father, Angus, is deputy chairman.'

'Fraser, Angus and James. Rather suggests a Scottish heritage.' James nodded.

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'No doubt they both assume that in the fullness of time you'll become chairman.'

'I've already made it clear that's not going to happen,' said James without hesitation.

'From everything I've read or heard about your grandfather, he's used to getting his own way.'

'True,' James replied. 'But sometimes he forgets we come from the same stock,' he added with a smirk.

'I had the same problem with my father,' admitted William. 'He's a criminal barrister, a QC, and he always assumed I'd follow him in chambers and later join him at the bar, despite my telling him from an early age that I wanted to lock up criminals, not be paid extortionate fees to keep them out of jail.'

'George Bernard Shaw was right,' declared James. 'We are separated by a common language. For you, the bar means courts and lawyers. For an American it means high stools and drinks.'

'A sharp criminal will always try to change the subject,' said William. 'But a thorough detective won't allow himself to lose the thread. You didn't answer my question about your grandfather's feelings about you not wanting to be chairman of the company.'

'My grandfather, I suspect, is worse than your father,' said James. 'He's already threatening to cut me out of his will if I don't join the company after leaving Harvard. But he'll never be allowed to do that as long as my grandmother's alive.'

William chuckled.

'Would it be too much of an imposition, sir, to ask if I might be allowed to spend an hour or so a day with you

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during the voyage?' James asked, without displaying his previous confidence.

'I'd enjoy that. Around this time of the morning would suit me, because that's when my wife will be at her yoga class. But there's one proviso: should you ever meet her, you won't tell her what we've been talking about.'

'And what have you been talking about?' asked Beth, as she appeared by their side.

James leapt up. 'The price of gold, Mrs Warwick,' he said, looking earnest.

'Then you will have quickly discovered it's a subject about which my husband knows very little,' said Beth, giving the young man a warm smile.

'I was about to tell you, James,' said William, 'that my wife is far brighter than I am, which is why she's the keeper of pictures at the Fitzmolean Museum and I'm a mere Detective Chief Inspector.'

'The youngest in the Met's history,' said Beth.

'Although should you ever mention the Met to my wife, she'll assume you're talking about one of the finest museums on earth, rather than London's police force.'

'I was so glad you managed to get the Vermeer back,' said James, turning to Mrs Warwick.

It was Beth's turn to look surprised. 'Yes,' she eventually managed, 'and fortunately it can't be stolen again because the thief is dead.'

'Miles Faulkner,' said James, 'who died in Switzerland, after suffering a heart attack.'

William and Beth looked at each other but said nothing.

'You even attended the funeral, Chief Inspector, presumably to convince yourself he was dead.'

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'How can you possibly know that?' said William, once again on the back foot.

'I read *The Spectator* and the *New Statesman* every week, which keeps me up to date on what's happening in Britain, and then try to form my own opinion.'

'Of course you do,' said William.

'I look forward to seeing you again tomorrow, sir,' said James, 'when I'll be interested to find out if you think it's possible Miles Faulkner is still alive.'

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