

# A PROFESSIONAL VENDETTA

**Terry Morgan**

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## **About “A Professional Vendetta.”**

Oxford University biology professor ‘Eddie’ Higgins is a veteran of student street demonstrations against environmental destruction and big business.

In his sixties and still an eccentric but passionate environmental activist well-known for his total disregard for personal appearance he has become the ‘scientific adviser’ to a local company, Vital Cosmetics, run by its new and vivacious chief executive, Isobel Johnson. It doesn’t start well.

“Yours is an industry dogged by exaggerated claims, impossible claims and false claims,” he tells her.

The two are total opposites but ‘Eddie’ is convinced there is something wrong with the way the company is being run and so, belatedly, does Isobel Johnson.

So, starts an investigation led by Mark Dobson from the small but high-tech international fraud investigators, Asher & Asher, and its new, young recruit, Ritchie Nolan, straight out of a north London drama school. Ritchie, acting undercover as a street-wise racketeer Micky Parker, is sent to Thailand to infiltrate a Pattaya-based Chinese and Russian gang involved in counterfeiting, money-laundering, narcotics and credit card fraud. What he uncovers is something much bigger.

*“Through this fast-moving story of a serious international criminal investigation runs a deeply philosophical and cleverly written analysis of modern society and its emphasis on vanity, selfishness and outward appearances. A truly unique piece of work.”*

*“A really well written fast-paced plot. Every woman should read it, although just fiction you might start to think about buying anti-ageing products. I totally enjoyed reading it. Some nice humour, also.”*

## VENDETTA

### CHAPTER 1

**Being a creature of unerring and predictable habit**, Edward James Higgins, professor of tropical plant science at Oxford University did what he always did when it rained during his bike ride to work. He hung his wet socks and sandals next to his bicycle clips on the radiator to dry. Then he spent the rest of that Saturday morning padding around the laboratory in bare feet whilst offering a student the benefit of his knowledge of *Curvularia aragrostidis* as a cause of leaf spot in pineapples.

An hour later, alone once more, he sat quietly at his corner desk examining a computer print-out and glancing occasionally at the faded remains of an old newspaper cutting pinned to the cork board.

With the dark, shoulder-length hair and central parting, few would have recognised the accompanying photo as a forty-year old photo of himself as a short-lived celebrity, a student demonstrator and a fanatic, pale-faced environmental activist who the press had dubbed “Huggy”. A few old friends still called him Huggy, but nowadays, he was mostly known, even by first year students, as Eddie.

Eddie, his bicycle, his sandals and his flapping old raincoat were well known around the streets of Oxford but, at sixty-two years old, the one-time Ozzie Osborne look-alike now sported a central parting that had broadened to six inches. “Hope springs eternally, but there’s nothing wrong internally,” he’d say in response to cruel jibes about his hair that had receded to a ring of sparse grey threads and fluff. Eddie was an enthusiastic writer of satirical poetry in what little spare time he had and whenever he looked at that old photo, he felt inspired to scribble another.

He’d just taken a sheet of paper and scribbled, “there once was a boy of twenty who’s now approaching seventy,” when the phone rang.

“Your visitor’s here, Eddie,” said Charlie who combined janitorial duties with unlocking the front door on quiet, Saturday mornings.

“Send her over, Charlie.”

Eddie knew who it was although they’d not yet met. This was the chairman or chairwoman, whatever it was she described herself as, of a local, Oxford-based cosmetics company who had offered the university money in the form of a student bursary. Universities grabbed any cash on offer and Bill Hughes, the head of department, had done his best to quell Eddie’s well-known opinions on industry and capitalism and especially what Eddie called ‘the vanity business’ and accept.

Remembering his bare feet, Eddie sat on the floor to drag on his socks and thought back to how Bill Hughes had finally persuaded him.

“We could use the money, Eddie, so can you try putting aside your well-known personal opinions, prejudices and suspicions about businesses for once?”

Eddie had been adamant. “No.”

“Come on Eddie. Not all of them are so bad and you know as well as I do that your opinions are quickly seen for what they are – unfounded, private vendettas.”

“No.”

“Not even if, as part of the deal, you become their appointed scientific adviser, Eddie?” Bill had winked. “With all that that might offer? Influence? Powers of persuasion? Change for the better?”

“Well, if you put it like that.”

That was almost a year ago. Now, wearing his damp socks, Eddie went to the door and opened it to a wall of perfume.

Standing there was an unexpectedly tall, slim, black-haired woman in a dark suit who looked much younger than he’d imagined. This wasn’t the squat, savage-looking, bespectacled and mousy-haired chairman and chief executive of his imagination but a taller, more delicate creature with pure white skin, shiny red lips and deep brown eyes surrounded by thick, black paint. She smiled at him.

“Professor Higgins?”

“Call me Eddie.”

“May I come in?”

Baroness Isobel Johnson (she was one of those who had acquired a title for being well connected in circles that Eddie would deliberately avoid even if the opportunity arose) slipped passed him and he checked her from behind. She was

wearing shiny, red, high-heeled shoes and black stockings. A flimsy red scarf was draped over a dark grey jacket and beneath that was a matching grey skirt. A red handbag hung from her shoulder.

Eddie's low interest in personal details meant he hadn't learned much about her beforehand. Had he bothered he'd have discovered that Isobel Johnson was highly regarded in some circles. She was a regular contributor to magazines on fashion and such-like and was often called upon to speak on the radio or TV or at conferences in support of women in business. All Eddie knew was that not a drop of rain had touched her so she'd clearly arrived by car or taxi, certainly not by bicycle.

He was still holding the door open with his glasses hanging on the cord around his neck. "We banned those sorts of shoes some years ago," he said. "They leave marks on the laboratory floor."

Isobel turned and looked at him and Eddie saw a striking resemblance to a waxworks model of a Chinese concubine he'd once seen at Madame Tussaud's. It was the glossy red lipstick that clinched it.

"Of course," Isobel said. "How thoughtless of me. Shall I leave them outside?"

Eddie wondered about that because he'd also been at the forefront of a ban on high heels in corridors but at this rate, she'd need to return home for a complete change of clothing. "Outside is fine," he said beckoning to the corridor.

He replaced his glasses to watch how she bent over in the tight skirt and removed each shoe by balancing on one leg. Eddie, himself, would have sat on the floor. He watched her place them neatly against the wall, brush the skirt down and then turn to look up at him from a slightly lower altitude. "Better?" she asked.

"Thank you," Eddie said. "Please come in. Take the stool by the incubator."

"Did you put the kettle on as you said you would, Professor Higgins?"

"Yes. It has already boiled. Twice. Tea?"

"Thank you."

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Neither thank you. It's a big laboratory, Professor Higgins."

"Call me Eddie. "

"And you're in charge?"

"Yes." Not only was Eddie in charge but the laboratory bore his name on a plate fixed to the door. 'Professor Edward J. Higgins. Plant Pathology.' Had she not noticed it?

"Biscuit?"

“What sort do you have?”

“Osborne. Rich Tea. Or whatever they’re now called.”

He busied himself with two mugs of tea, one with milk and two sugars, the other without. He squeezed the tea bags with the spoon, checked they were fully spent of colour and polyphenols and dropped them in the pedal bin. Then he grabbed four biscuits from the packet.

“This looks very complicated Professor Higgins.”

In looking to see what it was that was so complicated, the tea from one mug spilt on the floor so Eddie wiped the splashes with his foot hoping she hadn’t seen. Hot wetness seeped into his still damp, grey socks. “Gas chromatographic and mass spectrographic printouts. Some students’ work. Results from a few tests on krabok nut oil,” he said.

Eddie was a world expert on tropical hardwood trees such as kraboks, their nuts and their fungal diseases but he tried hard not to bore anyone with too much science. He’d seen too many eyes glaze over in the past to even try.

“And what does it tell you?”

He slid the mug of tea towards her leaving a trail of wetness and put two biscuits alongside it. That’s when he noticed her fingers, the shiny red nails and three rings – gold with clear little stones.

“My students were asked to look for therapeutic properties, particularly antifungal ones amongst the aldehydes and esters components in nut oils.” He was speaking somewhat distractedly because nail paint always intrigued him. Why did they do it? What was the purpose?

“I see,” Isobel replied.

“In your cosmetics business, you call them essential oils, Baroness Johnson.”

“Isobel, please.”

“In theory, when choosing an essential oil for human use you would want one with a high therapeutic value and low toxicity. There are many different compounds within each of the major categories – in fact there are several hundred individual chemical substances in these oils. That makes it difficult to evaluate them chemically. Even though a chromatograph may show only a few of the constituents of an oil, one still needs knowledge of many individual substances and their properties to read and understand a GC-MS report. Some components can be quite toxic in large quantities.” Eddie glanced at her from the corner of his eye. “But you know all that of course. You’re in the cosmetics business.”

Isobel tried sipping her tea but Eddie knew it would be far too hot for her delicate red lips. She put the mug down.

Over his half-moons he watched her looking at the screen through two strands of straight black hair that had fallen forward. Her brown eyes peered through long black eyelashes that were either false or fluffed up with those little black brushes they use to improve the flutter effect. Her eyebrows were thick, black and neat mirror images of each another.

“This,” he said pressing a few keys, “is a comparison of two oils that you might think were identical – lavender oils. Lavender is useful for teaching students. If lavender is grown above 2,000 feet, the ester content increases. This, some say, makes high altitude lavender oil more useful in aromatherapy and therefore more profitable.

“We’re talking serious biochemistry coupled with complex benefits and toxicity testing, Baroness. Claims, for instance, that lavenders have calming effects and antispasmodic properties are - what shall I say? - mostly hearsay. Most users and sellers of aromatherapy products don’t have the slightest understanding of the chemistry behind the ludicrous claims they make.”

Eddie was getting into the swing of things now. He pulled up another stool and sat down close enough to find her perfume quite overpowering. “And neither do perfume and cosmetics manufacturers,” he added, wrinkling his nose.

She smiled. “But whoever heard of someone dying from an overdose of skin cream, Professor?”

“And whoever heard of someone taking an anti-ageing cream who finds the ageing process has been stopped in its tracks,” he snapped back.

“But it’s their choice.” She said checking the heat of her tea again. “If they feel and look better then...”

Eddie erupted. “The word anti means against,” he said. “Anti-ageing therefore means against ageing. It means something, in this case a mix of chemicals, that acts against ageing or at least delays the biological process of ageing. No such single chemical exists. Anti-ageing does not mean lessening the visual signs of ageing. The cosmetics industry uses expressions to distort scientific fact. It turns clearly understood words and changes their meanings. It distorts truth to get around advertising standards that are, in themselves, inadequate. The cosmetics industry lies, misrepresents and steals words to sell products that don’t work.”

“Really, Professor, I don’t quite...” but there was no interrupting Eddie when he was on a roll.

“Take the word serum,” he said. “Ask any woman these days what serum is and she’ll tell you it’s cosmetic. No. it’s not. Serum is a highly complex body fluid in which blood cells circulate in blood vessels. Serology is a scientific subject in its own right. Serum is not, and never can be, a mix of a few synthetic

chemicals in a drop of oil sold in pink tubes and little bottles. They stole the word, Baroness.”

Isobel looked appalled as if no-one had ever spoken to her like this but Eddie still hadn't finished.

“And do you think that someone in a society like ours where good quality food of all types is cheap and available in indecent abundance needs to take food supplements and consume energy drinks as if they're vital for general health and performance?”

He was pleased how he'd slipped in that indirect reference to the new range of Vital Sports drinks. He made a noise that was meant to sound triumphant and went on:

“What on earth is meant by replacing lost electrolytes for example? Do they really mean the sodium chloride in sweat? If so, say so. Does anyone who drinks these concoctions properly understand words like hypotonic, hypertonic or isotonic? And, even if it was possible, would anyone really need to improve and speed up their metabolism?”

Baroness Johnson wriggled off her stool. “Professor Higgins. I thought I was here to listen to your views following a talk you gave to our staff a short while ago.”

That was true. Talking to staff now and again was one of the jobs of the scientific adviser. So far, Eddie had only talked to them once, formally, but once was enough. He'd walked around their manufacturing area more than once but had found senior staff boring, disinterested, arrogant, flippant and, quite frankly, rude.

Eddie was still seated and Isobel was facing him at eye level so he stood because his mother had always told him to stand up if a seated lady that he was conversing with stood.

“Yes,” he said, “Because according to your short email to Professor Bill Hughes you had concerns about the way your business was being run. You're in the cosmetics and health products business and you've appointed a scientific adviser. Well, here I am – asking questions and advising.”

Isobel sniffed. “Professional advice is one thing. Personal views are quite another, Professor.”

“Not so,” Eddie said crossly. “For a scientist, different sets of views must be allowed to overlap until indisputable facts tilt opinion one way or another. And, anyway, the message I received was that you wanted opinions on staff motivation and commitment, not just their scientific knowledge. That is a pity because as none of your staff are properly qualified their ability to question

technical data is very limited. But it was as if you were suspicious of goings on within the company. Am I right?"

She sniffed again so he knew he was right. He continued: "If so, then as your scientific adviser and as I am not at all clear who I actually report to, I would like to say that Vital started giving me cause for concern several months ago. Those concerns have recently increased substantially."

"I see."

Eddie swallowed some tea and wiped his mouth. "So, do you want to hear my views?"

"Yes," she said. "That's why I'm here. And if you are in any doubt, Professor, you report to me."

Eddie was pleased she'd cleared up that long-standing question but it was the way she announced it that took him by surprise. It was surprisingly forceful.

At last she took a reasonable sip of her tea and nibbled on a biscuit. She was standing up and he'd always imagined well brought up ladies ate and drank sitting down. "What qualifications does your chief buyer have?"

"Peter Lester?"

"That's him. What is his background?"

"Business, Professor. He was not my appointee. You must understand all the staff were in place before I became Chairman. The chief executive, Nick Carstairs and the finance director, Boris Hamilton, were also in place."

"Nick Carstairs?"

"He was in banking."

"Boris Hamilton?"

"Accountancy."

"The quality manager, Donald McVie?"

"I believe he worked for a local engineering company but why do you ask?"

"I think one or more of them broke into my home."

That shook her. Her eyes widened and the thick black eyelashes didn't move at all for a full three seconds. "Broke in? How? When?"

"I trod in a sticky blob of chewing gum outside my front door."

"Chewing gum?"

"Lester and McVie both chew gum."

"Do they? But it could have been the postman or a delivery driver."

"Perhaps, but let's see what the finger prints tell us."



“Finger prints? Did you call the police?”

“Finger prints found in dust in my home laboratory are being looked at by my private investigator.”

“Private investigator? Good gracious. But why on earth would anyone break in.”

“To steal my krabok nuts, Baroness.”

“Nuts?” she repeated.

“And to steal my personal data and correspondence. Breaking into my home is far easier than breaking into this laboratory.”

“Your private correspondence? Why?”

“Let’s begin with my nuts,” Eddie said. “Drums of krabok nut oil are used in some of your cosmetics. What’s more, during my jungle forays in South East Asia - which I conduct twice a year, by the way - I came across a type of krabok tree that produced three times as much of a certain vital component as normal. Those trees could become very valuable if protected and genetic and other tests were performed. And that’s not just because of their value in cosmetics. Far more interesting to me is that we’ve shown they produce an interesting oil that could be extremely valuable in medicine. However, Baroness, that is all now very unlikely as those trees were also stolen.”

Eddie stopped at that point and watched her fingers playing around her shiny red lips. Her cheeks, too, showed a slightly rosier tinge. “Stolen?” she said.

“Perhaps I should have said illegally felled – taken from a prized and protected national park and wild life sanctuary in northern Thailand.”

Isobel’s cheeks were growing rosier by the second.

“All that aside,” Eddie said more quietly, “With regard to your concerns about the way your company is run, I’m not a businessman but it’s all about standards. We should all live according to a set of standards. In Vitals’ case staff should be suitably qualified, understand the products they make and sell and should not, whilst being remunerated by Vital, be tempted into doing things on the side that verge on illegality.”

He stopped then, wondering whether he’d gone too far. But it was Mark Dobson, his private investigator friend, who had sown many of Eddie’s suspicions. He watched Isobel remount the stool, wriggle and pull her skirt down to almost cover her knees. She sipped her tea, pushed the rogue strand of hair from her face and took a deep breath. Then came the minor capitulation that Mark Dobson had forecast when he knew Eddie was meeting the top boss.

“We all have to make the best of whatever we inherit,” she said.

Eddie had just dunked half an Osborne biscuit and lost it to the depths of his cup of tea. He decided to search for it later.

“I think, Baroness, that what you’ve inherited is a business philosophy of cutting corners, contempt for quality assurance and, or so it seems to me, total disregard for science, international law and the environment. And, personally, I would never have employed any of your senior management team. How does that make you feel?”

“Bad enough to seek your help, Professor Higgins. A public scandal would not be good for anyone. Despite your obvious passion, your views are, I admit, not too different from my own. The burglary is new though.”

“And I didn’t tell you about the United Nations and Interpol papers I’d been reading?”

“Interpol? Good gracious.”

Eddie wiped tea wetness from his nose and mouth with the back of his hand, but knocked his glasses off in the process. “I was planning some direct action of my own,” he said, hooking them back over his ears, “but I phoned an international commercial crime investigator instead.”

“Interpol? A commercial crime investigator?”

Suddenly Eddie felt sorry for her. Sometimes, he had to admit, he was a little too harsh on people. Students mostly laughed when he’d left the room but he had, once, made one cry. The memory of her screwed up face and the trembling lower lip still lingered. He looked at Isobel over the top of his glasses. He’d never seen a face with such evenly distributed features before and it wasn’t just the eyebrows. One side of her face was a perfect mirror image of the other.

“Would you like lunch?” he said quietly. “If it’s not too crowded, I often eat at Greggs. They do a very nice cheese and ham baguette.”

## **CHAPTER 2**

Colin Asher often ate his lunch with his feet on his office desk. For the eighteen hours or so he spent staring at his bank of computers each day, putting his feet up for ten minutes felt like home, but the arrival of the Pret a Manger takeaway next door to the office on Edgware Road had been a disaster for Asher’s waistline.

On the morning Eddie had called, it had been an egg and cress sandwich. “Asher and Asher,” he’d said with his mouth full. “Who am I speaking to, please?”

“At this stage, it’s an enquiry,” the voice said.

“We all have to start somewhere,” he replied. “How may I help you?”

You’re calling Asher and Asher. We’re international commercial crime investigators and I’m Colin Asher. How may I help?”

“I was given this number by a friend. I understand you are a sort of private investigator.”

“In a way that’s true but there’s nothing ordinary about Asher and Asher, sir.”

“That is what I was told. I’m calling from Oxford University.”

“You’re a student?” Colin asked although, to be fair, the caller hadn’t sounded like a student. “A mature one perhaps?”

“Mature is one way of describing me.”

“Nevertheless, a name would get us started.”

“Huggy. Will that do for now?”

“Huggy?” Asher repeated as if unsure if he’d heard correctly.

“I’m a little unfamiliar with your type of business. It sounds unusual. You understand?”

“The learning curve has to start somewhere, Mr Huggy and as I said there’s nothing ordinary about Asher and Asher. International commercial crime, fraud and similar misdemeanours is our speciality. If it’s a simple domestic matter I can refer you to a friend. What’s the problem?”

Eddie had paused to reconsider his approach. It was such a long pause that Colin Asher wondered if he’d gone. Then: “I suppose I should be frank. Mr Asher. I’m not a student. My name is Edward Higgins, often referred to as Eddie, sometimes known as Huggy. More formally I’m professor of tropical plant science and head of the mycology research centre at Oxford.”

“Head of what, sir?”

“Mycology, Mr Asher. Fungi to you. The study of those millions of essential living things that inhabit the air you breathe, the water you drink, the soil beneath your feet and thrive on human detritus and other decaying matter to keep both you and the rest of the planet alive and in a relatively healthy state.”

“Ah, like the blue fluffy stuff on an old sandwich.”

“That would probably be a type of Penicillium, Mr Asher. Without which and the keen observations of Alexander Fleming, you probably would not have survived much beyond childhood let alone long enough to enjoy your sandwich. Be eternally grateful for blue moulds.”

“Righty ho,” Asher replied wondering how the caller knew he was eating a sandwich. He tossed the remains of it in the bin. “So how can I help you, Professor Higgins?”

“Cosmetics industry, Mr Asher. Health drinks industry. Scandalous businesses that rely on false promises and human weakness for their very existence. But I’ve been acting – after some arm-twisting I admit - as a scientific adviser to one such business. There are things that concern me.”

“Would you like to elaborate?”

“You operate over open phone lines, Mr Asher? I assumed you’d provide a certain amount of confidentiality.”

“We do, sir,” Colin Asher replied. He coughed and then removed his feet from the table. “We normally advise face to face discussions at all stages. I like to get a feel for the problem before arranging one.”

Eddie decided he’d been a little frivolous calling himself Huggy but he’d never had to engage the services of a private investigator before, let alone one specialising in international commercial crime. “Well, that’s good to hear,” he said. “I’m not a businessman of course but I could list a few things, if you like.”

“Go ahead.” Asher said taking a deep breath and already regretting throwing his sandwich away.

“Insufficient and inaccurate labelling of cosmetics, use of uncontrolled substances in skin preparations, the ludicrous inclusion of unnatural and unhealthy ingredients in so-called health drinks. Dubious origins of imported raw materials and semi-finished product. The repackaging and re-labelling of same. Exaggerated claims, impossible claims and utterly false claims. I could go on. Is this the sort of thing you deal with?”

“Counterfeiting is a particular speciality of ours, Professor. What you describe is not dissimilar. Do you have evidence to back up your concerns?”

Despite the south London accent he was hearing Eddie’s confidence was slowly rising. Evidence was also what good science depended on.

“I’m a scientist with access to world class laboratory facilities, Mr Asher. I’m also capable of distinguishing between the well-researched, well-tested and properly approved pharmaceutical products you get with a prescription and products sold freely over the counter at extortionate prices that make claims to impossible miracles. I’ll give you an example. The claim to stop the ageing process in its tracks, remove all wrinkles and return you to a form of beauty you only dream about or see advertised in glossy magazines. Am I making my point?”

“Very clearly, sir. You say you are an adviser to one such company?”

“A local, Oxford-based company called Vital Cosmetics. Arm-twisted as I said and, fortunately, not required to waste too much time on it. I’m their token real scientist, Mr Asher, useful to mention now and then whenever it suits them. But

I have to admit that I thought at the time of my appointment it might prove useful in getting to know how these businesses operate.”

“You have strong opinions about such business, professor?”

“Which I could continue to expound on if you so wished.”

“Perhaps later. But we’d still need evidence.”

“South East Asia,” Eddie said without hesitation. “I’m a frequent visitor.”

“OK,” Colin said slowly. “Can you explain just a little more?”

“Field trips, looking for naturally occurring, biologically active compounds that might have some use as fungicides, insecticides and so on.”

That may not have been enough but Colin settled for patience. “Are you successful?”

“It takes time,” Eddie said. “The hunting, the finding, the sampling, the testing. Then someone comes along and undermines it all. They hear about a scientific paper suggesting a possible active ingredient from, say the nuts and bark of a subspecies of a krabok tree growing in a protected forest in northern Thailand and before you know it, another untested, unproved product is on the market as a miracle cure with little or no scientific evidence to support it.”

“That must be frustrating,” he commiserated.

“And Vital Cosmetics have some staff that I find are - what shall I say? - unprofessional, Mr Asher.”

“Evidence again?”

“Cutting of corners on quality control, deliberately overlooking sound evidence that ingredients don’t work.”

“It’s commercial pressure. Not unknown I’m afraid.”

“Directors with close links to Asian producers of similar products.”

“It happens.”

“One of the Asian businesses has links to Russian criminal gangs.”

“You sure of that?”

“I ran a few checks of my own, Mr Asher.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“There’s plenty more, but do you see why I’m calling you? Because I can tell you, Mr Asher, it’s not just the cosmetics industry that concerns me. The health foods and energy drinks firms are just the same, aided and abetted by the supermarkets and High Street chains of course.”

That last comment triggered something with Colin Asher. One of their current clients was a Taiwanese company struggling with counterfeit energy drinks. “You hold some strong opinions about these businesses I see, Professor.”

“Different viewpoints are essential if we are to evolve into better animals, Mr Asher.”

Colin Asher took a breath. “Then perhaps a face to face might be useful. As it happens my partner has just left on a business trip to Taiwan and Malaysia. We’re extremely busy at present but I’ll ask Mark to call you when he returns. Mark Dobson’s the field man. I just sit in the office and twiddle the knobs of a bank of computers. Would that suit you, Professor?”

“I hope it won’t be too long.”

“About a week or so. Would that be acceptable?”

“I suppose I’ll have to wait. Meanwhile, thank you. Call me Eddie.”

### **CHAPTER 3**

Mark Dobson had returned from Taiwan and Malaysia and Colin Asher and he were having their routine post trip debrief in the Asher & Asher office on Edgware Road.

“Which brings me onto the good news,” Colin Asher said after twenty minutes. “The need to bring in some fresh blood.”

“I’m too young to retire,” Dobson responded.

“But much too stretched. I’ve got Ching and Else to help me in the office. You need someone. Anything could happen. You could die in a plane crash. How would I find time to attend the funeral?”

“I wouldn’t notice. If you felt any guilt, post mortem, then buy a headstone.”

In recent weeks, the two partners had mostly talked on the phone or by video link and only met for brief case reviews, progress reports and decision-making.

When Mark Dobson was away and engrossed in a new assignment, he found he quickly forget what Colin looked like. Now, he looked at the familiar round face of the man he’d known for fifteen years and at the way he slumped in his chair. He was putting on weight. While he himself travelled and ate badly, irregularly and sometimes not at all, Colin sat in the office playing with the computers and sending out for Pret a Manger snacks every hour.

“Someone fresh coming on board would mean you might even finish a few outstanding jobs like the one for Kenny Tan in Taiwan who, don’t forget, has already paid us a decent fee up front,” Colin said.

“Sounds to me like you’ve got some news to announce.”

“I found someone, that’s what.”

“Without telling me?”

“You were away.”

“Anyway, you’re putting on weight. You could die long before me.”

“No chance.”

“So, who is it?”

They had been considering doubling the field staff for months. Ex police were easy enough to recruit for an international commercial crime investigation company like Asher & Asher but the problem with ex police was they never stopped looking and sounding like police. They couldn’t seem to shake off their attitude, their mannerisms, the way they walked and talked. Dobson kept telling Asher they needed a complete fresher, a raw character they could train up. He was about to find out how fresh and raw the recruit would be.

“Richie Nolan,” Colin Asher said. “Keith’s boy.”

“Keith?”

“Keith Nolan.”

“Ah. That Keith.”

Keith Nolan was a friend of theirs, now doing something in the SIS, the Secret Intelligence Service, that no-one talked about.

“Keith reckons Ritchie’s wasting his talent so I interviewed him at Costa Coffee outside the drama school where he’s a student.”

“He’s a drama student?”

“I thought we’d agreed we needed someone who could blend in and fall easily into character when necessary. Someone adaptable and young.”

“That’s it, isn’t it? You decided that at forty-five I’m too old and no longer blend in but stick out like a sore thumb amongst the latest generation with their tattoos, haircuts and ear-rings. How old is he?”

“Twenty-five or six,” Asher said vaguely. “Right colour as well. In this day and age, we need to be seen to meet our commitments to ethnic diversity.”

“But you’ve already got a Chinese and a Pole helping you on your computers and fetching your take-aways.”

“Despite their wide geographical origins, Ching and Else are regarded by the system as white, Mark. Ritchie’s a nutty brown guy with Jamaican blood or some other ancient African genes. He’s got an Afro cut, tight jeans and proper trainers. He’s just what we need. I’ve told him we offer practical, hands-on experience, excitement, training, salary and expenses all thrown in.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked what he’d be doing as if he feared he might be making coffee or fetching sandwiches on minimum wage. I told him he’d be working for Asher & Asher.”

**Richie Nolan’s face had sagged at the thought of working for Asher & Asher** because Colin’ Asher’s pale face bore all the downtrodden looks of a struggling family solicitor, an accountant or estate agent who rarely saw the sun and who’s only source of nourishment was cappuccino coffee with leaf patterns on the froth and pre-packed sandwiches. Asher quickly squashed those superficial impressions.

“It’s highly specialised detection work - international fraud, corruption, money laundering. That sort of thing. We often work with the SIS, MI6, the FBI and the CIA. Interested?”

Ritchie’s face had brightened. “My father works for one of those. But he never talks about it.”

“Quite right, too,” Asher had said wiping the froth from his nose. “You can’t bring work home every night to discuss around the dinner table with the wife and kids. Good friend of ours is Keith. He recommended you. Said the chances of you finding any meaningful employment on TV or in Hollywood were limited to the point of unachievable. But he thought we might be able to use some of what you learned during your first week of drama classes.”

Richie’s black eyes set in his brown, part Jamaican face surrounded by long and tightly knitted black curls tied with brightly coloured strings, had shone briefly but clouded over again when Asher warned him that if he bragged, exaggerated or even dreamed of telling anyone what he was doing, his father would quickly find a way of dealing with him. And if his father didn’t, then one or more of Asher & Asher’s foreign clients certainly would. So, was he still interested?

“Might be. Well, yes. I suppose. Big company, is it?”

“Just me and my partner Mark Dobson with two part-time ladies nicked from the old fraud squad. We cover all corners of the globe, north, south, east and west of Edgware Road though nothing extra-terrestrial yet. Still interested?”



“Mmm. You travel a lot?” Ritchie asked checking his Converse trainers, then wetting his finger to remove a speck of north London street dirt from the toe of one of them.

“Me? No, not if I can help it. Mark does that with a few different names and passports. I just guard the office in Edgware Road. It’s a miniature version of GCHQ in Cheltenham and the CIA in Langley, Virginia. You any good on IT?”

Ritchie livened up again. “Oh sure. I’ve got an iPhone.”

“Good man. Computer software? AshHack317, 318 and 319, for example?”

“Um, I’m not too familiar with those.”

“Not surprising really, I suppose,” Asher had told him. “I wrote them myself.”

**“So, when will he start?” Mark Dobson asked.**

“As soon as you’re ready. Meanwhile, you need to call Professor Huggy Higgins.”

## **CHAPTER 4**

Eddie’s reputation for personal hygiene and untidiness was well known but there was no mistaking his commitment to routine.

On the first Saturday of every month he would catch the 3.36 pm train from Oxford to Bristol to attend Bristol Poet’s Night - an evening of live poetry recitals at the Ship pub at which Eddie was a regular and popular performer going, unsurprisingly, by the stage name of Huggy.

Eddie’s performances were not quite in the style of Wordsworth, Yeats or Byron. You either enjoyed his verse for their sour humour or turned the other way in embarrassment but Eddie wasn’t bothered either way. He specialised in a sort of rhyming satire through which he channelled his many aversions to modern life. It made a satisfying diversion from science, research and teaching. “Taxing but relaxing,” he called it.

Mark Dobson had phoned him the day before and so, anxious to speed things up, Eddie had suggested meeting in Bristol at the Ship.

When he felt the tap on his shoulder, he thought at first it was someone who’d found his glasses. They’d fallen off just as he’d mounted the stage for his first performance although he hadn’t needed them. If he forgot a line, he’d ad lib for a while until he remembered where he was. That night he’d finished with a

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