

Book One

London

Friday, April 9, 1926

Chapter One

Eight days after stepping off the *Spirit of New Orleans* from New York, Harris Stuyvesant nearly killed a man.

The fact of the near-homicide did not surprise him; that it had taken him eight days to get there, considering the circumstances, was downright astonishing.

Fortunately, his arm drew back from full force at the last instant, so he didn't actually smash the guy's face in. But as he stood over the prostrate figure, watching the woozy eyelids flicker back towards consciousness, the tingle of frustration in his right arm told him what a near thing it had been. He'd been running on rage for so long, driven by fury and failure and the scars on Tim's skull and the vivid memory of bright new blood on a sparkling glass carpet followed by flat black and the sound of the funeral dirges that—well, the guy had got off lucky, that was all.

He couldn't even really claim it was self defense. The cops were right there—constables, he should call them, this being England—and they'd already been moving to intercept the red-faced Miners' Union demonstrator who was hammering one meaty forefinger against Stuyvesant's chest to make a point when Stuyvesant's arm came up all on its own and just laid the man out on the paving stones.

A uniformed constable cut Stuyvesant away from the miner's friends as neatly as a sheepdog with a flock, and suggested in no uncertain terms that now would be a good time for him to go about his business, sir. Stuyvesant looked into the clean-shaven

English face beneath the helmet and felt his fist tighten, but he caught hold of himself before things got out of control.

He nodded to the cop, glanced at the knot of demonstrators forming around the fallen warrior, and bent to pick up the envelope he'd dropped in the scuffle. He turned on his heels and within sixty seconds and two corners found silence, as abrupt and unexpected as the sudden appearance of the Union workers had been five minutes earlier.

He put his back against the dirty London bricks, closed his eyes, and drew in, then let out, one prolonged breath. After a minute, he raised his hand to study the damage: a fresh slice across the already-scarred knuckle, bleeding freely. With his left hand he fished out his handkerchief and wrapped the hand, looking around until he spotted a promising doorway down the street,. Inside was a saloon bar. "Whiskey," he told the man behind the bar. "Double."

When the glass hit the bar, he dribbled half of it onto the cut—teeth were dirty things—and tossed the rest of it down his throat. He started to order a repeat, then remembered, and looked at his wrist watch with an oath.

Late already.

Oh, what the hell did it matter? He'd spent the last week chewing the ears of one office-worker after another; what made him think this one would be any different?

But that was just an excuse to stay here and drink.

Stuyvesant slapped some coins on the bar and went out onto the street. It was raining, again. He settled his hat, pulled up his collar, and hurried away.

It had proven a piss-poor time to come to London and talk to men behind desks. He'd known before he left New York that there was a General Strike scheduled at the end

of the month, in sympathy for the coal miners. However, this was England, not the States, and he'd figured there would be a lot of big talk followed by a disgruntled, probably last-minute settlement. Instead, the working classes were rumbling, and their talk had gone past coal mining into rising up to smash the ruling class. The polite, Olde Worlde tea party dispute he'd envisioned, cake-on-a-plate compared to some of the rib-cracking, skull-smashing strikes Stuyvesant had been in, didn't look as if it was going to turn out the way he'd thought, either—not if men like those demonstrators had their way in the matter.

And God, the distraction it had caused in this town! One after another, the desk-bound men he'd come to see had listened to his questions and given him the same response: Does this have anything to do with the Strike? Then please, I'm busy, there's the door.

Yeah, that miner had been *damned* lucky, considering.

Maybe when this next one showed him the door—Carstairs was his name, Aldous Carstairs, what kind of pansy handle was that?—maybe that would be where his temper broke. Maybe the bureaucrat would get what the demonstrator hadn't.

He couldn't help feeling he had reached the bottom of the barrel when it came to a straightforward investigation. Certainly, he held out little hope that Carstairs would be anything more than going through motions—he'd come across the man more or less by accident the day before, sitting across the desk from a Scotland Yard official he'd met in New York years before. Now an exhausted and harassed looking official in a day-old shirt who, even before the inevitable tea tray arrived, was sorry he'd let Stuyvesant in.

“No, I’ve already talked to that man,” Stuyvesant told him, in answer to a suggested contact. “Yeah, him too. *And* him. That idiot? He was one of the first I saw on Monday, and frankly, the sooner he retires, the better off your country will be. No, that guy’s in France, and his secretary’s useless. Now, him I haven’t talked to, where—Scotland? Jesus, do I have to go to Scotland to ask about a man who lives in London?”

“I should give you to Carstairs,” the Yard official muttered, then immediately regretted the slip and hurried on. “What about...”

“Been there. Who’s this Carstairs fellow?” Stuyvesant’s instincts had come alert, aware of some overtone in the way the man said the name, but the fellow shook his head.

“Just a name, honestly, he doesn’t have anything to do with what you need. I think you should go talk to...” Stuyvesant was soon out the door, holding nothing more than three names on a slip of paper.

Outside the office door, a pair of men in bowlers sat waiting. Stuyvesant nodded to them, collected his hat and overcoat, walked down the hallway and around the corner. There he stopped, staring unseeing at the scrap of paper.

Give you to Carstairs. Not, *Give you Carstairs*, which would have suggested the resolution of a grudge, but a phrase with a touch of fear in the background: *I should feed you to Carstairs.*

Stuyvesant counted to thirty, then doubled back to the Yard man’s office. The two men were nowhere in sight when he walked in, and the secretary was just settling back at his desk.

“Sorry,” the American said, “I neglected to get a phone number. Just let me pop in—”

“I’m sorry, sir, he has another appointment.”

“Oh, I’ll just be—wait, maybe I could get it from you instead? The name’s Carstairs.”

The secretary looked blank for a moment and Stuyvesant resigned himself to a dud, but then the man’s eyebrows shot up. “Aldous Carstairs?”

“That’s the man. You have a phone number for him?”

The secretary’s glance at the closed door was eloquent testimony of the unusual nature of the request, but reluctantly, he went to a book in the bottom drawer of his desk, opened it to a page at the back, and copied out a number.

“Thanks,” Stuyvesant told him, and that was how he found himself running ten minutes late on a pouring wet Friday afternoon, a bloody handkerchief around one hand and a sodden scrap of paper in the other, searching for an address that he finally located in an utterly anonymous building a stone’s throw from Big Ben.

Chapter Two

The doorman took one look at the figure that lurched into his tidy foyer and moved to return the straying lunatic to the streets. Stuyvesant pushed down the impulse to deck another Brit and summoned his most charming, lop-sided smile, assuring the man that he did, in fact, have an appointment with Mr. Carstairs, although he'd had a little accident, if he could just phone..?

Without turning his back on the disheveled American, the man went back to his desk to pick up his telephone. He spoke, listened, grunted, and hung up.

“If you'll just wait a minute.”

It was less time than that when a weedy specimen with freckles and twitchy hands came through the connecting door, and stopped dead. He looked at Stuyvesant, and at the doorman (who gave him a What-did-I-say? shrug) then stood back, holding the door.

“Mr. Carstairs?” Stuyvesant asked.

“His secretary,” the man replied. “The Major is expecting you.”

He led the sodden visitor through a hallway and up a flight of stairs to a dark, highly polished wooden door. Inside, he took Stuyvesant's hat and coat, hung them over the radiator, and went to the desk, where he pushed a button and said to the air, “Mr. Stuyvesant.” He got the pronunciation right, *Sty* rather than the usual *Stooey*.

The response five seconds later was a click at the inner door.

The secretary came back around the desk and opened it. Stuyvesant stepped into the dim office.

The man behind the desk was in his early forties, slightly older than Harris Stuyvesant, and smooth: dark, oiled hair, the sheen of manicured fingernails, a perfectly knotted silk tie, and nary a wrinkle on his spotless shirt. A visitor's gaze might have slid right off him had they not caught on his striking eyes and unlikely mouth.

The eyes were an unrelieved black, with irises so dark they looked like vastly dilated pupils. They reminded Stuyvesant of a wealthy Parisian courtesan he'd known once, who attributed her success to belladonna, used to simulate wide-eyed fascination in the gaze she turned upon her clientele. Personally, her eyes had made Stuyvesant uneasy, because they'd robbed him of that subtle and incontrovertible flare of true interest. This man's eyes were the same; they looked like the doorway to an unlit and windowless room, a room from which anyone at all might be looking out.

The man's mouth, on the other hand, was almost obscenely generous, full and red and moist-looking. His lips might have made one think of passion, but somehow, a person could not imagine this man lost in a kiss.

When he put down his pen and rose at Stuyvesant's entrance, the visitor saw the third element to the man's visage: a twisting, long-healed scar down the left side of his face, hairline to collar.

Stuyvesant walked forward, forcing his gaze away from the scar and onto those ungiving eyes. The scar was nothing, after all, compared to some of the damage he'd had seen that week, eight years after the war to end wars—although it looked more like the work of a knife than a bayonet. The man held out his hand; in response, Stuyvesant lifted the once-white rag.

“You probably don’t want to shake this,” he said. “I had a little altercation on the way here with one of your miners. I’ll try not to bleed on the carpet.”

The dark gaze studied the makeshift dressing, then shifted to Stuyvesant’s clothing, and the man’s nostrils flared just a touch—why the hell had he stopped for that drink, Stuyvesant asked himself?—before he reached for the telephone on his desk.

“Bring some sticking plasters please, Mr. Lakely,” Aldous Carstairs said.

The secretary came in carrying a small box. Carstairs lifted his chin at Stuyvesant’s hand, and Lakely efficiently stripped away the handkerchief, applied the sticky bandages, wiped away the last of the blood, and gathered the debris, without a word being exchanged.

“Our guest would probably like a coffee,” Carstairs said. Stuyvesant might have hugged him, then and there, had he not noticed that, the entire time the secretary was in the office, he didn’t look at his employer once. *I should feed you to Carstairs.*

Not a huggable kind of a guy, Aldous Carstairs.

When the door was shut again, Carstairs held out his hand, starting anew. Stuyvesant took it briefly, and was grateful the man didn’t bear down: His whole hand had begun to throb.

“Aldous Carstairs,” the man said.

“Harris Stuyvesant. Thanks for seeing me.”

“Do sit down, Mr. Stuyvesant. What can I do for you?”

And for the twelfth—thirteenth? no, fourteenth time—Harris Stuyvesant launched onto his tale of woe, which repetition had long since stripped of anything resembling urgency, or even interest: terrorist bombs, Communist plots, ho hum.

He began, as he had thirteen times already, by laying his identification on the man's desk, along with the brief letter from Hoover, which said little more than Harris Stuyvesant was an active agent of the United States Justice Department's Bureau of Investigation, and any assistance would be appreciated. The letter was showing signs of wear.

Carstairs directed his unrevealing regard on the lines of typescript and the signature, then back to Stuyvesant, who gathered away his possessions and began his spiel.

"Like it says, I'm an agent with the Bureau of Investigation. I've come over here, unofficial-like, because we're looking into some possible links between a series of bombs in our country, and one of your citizens."

The coffee came then. Both men waited for it to be laid out and the secretary to leave.

"There are, hmm, official channels," Carstairs noted.

"Sure, and sometimes they're fine, but sometimes they're not." Stuyvesant listened to his own voice, and wondered why he was sounding like some small town hick—he'd very nearly said "ain't." *Act like a Bureau agent*, he ordered himself, *not some bloody brawler marching into this fellow's nice office at three in the afternoon stinking of booze*. He took the envelope from his pocket, seeing for the first time the scuff of someone's shoe on its crumpled flap, and removed the contents. One at a time, he unfolded them and laid them in front of the man.

"Last July, there was a fire-bomb at a Communist house in Chicago." He gave Carstairs a minute to look over the outline concerning the fire, then topped it with a

newspaper clipping. “In November, a Pennsylvania judge in charge of a sensitive Union case nearly got himself burned to a crisp when his car went up in flames.” Another piece of paper: “And in January, five men in a New York hotel room narrowly missed getting blown to pieces. The papers haven’t put the three together yet, but it’s only a matter of time.”

He sat back and let the man look at the pages. Three explosions, one gelignite, two incendiaries, all packaged in unexpected but carefully thought out containers. The target of the first one still didn’t make much sense, unless there was some rivalry—personal or political—that the Bureau hadn’t picked up on, but one confusing motive was the least of his problems.

When he’d reached the end of the pages, Carstairs lifted those dark holes back onto Stuyvesant.

They were approaching the tough part, when thirteen desk-dwellers had showed Stuyvesant the door.

“Took us a while to match up the pieces, but after a while we noticed that the devices had a couple things in common. One, it seemed they were inside everyday objects—a box of groceries delivered to the Reds in Chicago, a child’s doll on the back seat of the judge’s car, and a tray full of drinks in the New York hotel. Secondly, witnesses placed an Englishman near two of them.”

He put the sketch down first, the one based on the description given by the boy who’d delivered the Red’s groceries. It showed a slim man with dark hair, tinted glasses, and a thin moustache, who could have been any of one in ten men on the sidewalks outside.

On top of the drawing he put a glossy photograph, showing a crowd of passengers gathered on the deck of a ship, New York's skyline in the background. One figure had a circle around him: a slim man with dark hair and a moustache—and dark glasses.

Suppressing a sigh, he laid down the last piece of evidence: three Photostat copies of passenger manifests, from three sailings, with three black circles.

Invariably, it was this that raised thirteen pairs of eyebrows and had each man behind the desk pushing back to distance himself from absurdity. And Carstairs was no different.

Stuyvesant spoke before the man could drag out the inevitable Scarlet Pimpernel joke. “Yeah, I know how it looks: Richard Bunsen, your Labour Party's fair-haired boy. Crazy, huh? And that's why I'm *not* here officially, because who'd want an official inquiry until we're a little more sure of the facts? Basically, my boss is hoping you can give me something to take Bunsen's name off our list.” No need to mention that Stuyvesant himself hoped for evidence in the other direction, like maybe a couple of similar bombs on British soil that tied The Bastard in.

Because Stuyvesant had known in his bones back in January that the three were connected, and knew in his bones now that that Bunsen was the one. And Harris Stuyvesant's bones were never wrong.

Well, almost never.

But he hadn't been able to convince John Edgar Hoover, and he hadn't even tried to explain it to the others, any more than he could to Aldous Carstairs. He waited for the man's face to take on the wary expression of someone trapped on a train with a muttering

lunatic, and for the man's eyes to slide over to the office door, calculating just how dangerous the American was.

But Carstairs surprised him.

Something shifted in the back of those black eyes, something other than wariness. The Englishman reached down to jerk open a desk drawer, fumbling through it with unexpected clumsiness before his hand came out with a brown cigarillo. He made much of the business of lighting it, then closed the drawer and sat back inside the cloud of smoke. When he raised his gaze again to his visitor, the little crow's feet next to his eyes had gone completely smooth and his face was just a little too open, a little too wide-eyed innocent, to believe.

Stuyvesant had figured Carstairs for some kind of Intelligence man—the uneasiness of the Scotland Yard man and the lack of identifying plaque on the front door of this building told him this wasn't a more open official. And because he'd met several of the domestic Intelligence men already—his equivalents here—he assumed Carstairs inhabited the more clandestine reaches of M.I.6, Britain's international arm. For a man like that—in other words, a spy—to suddenly twitch with interest, his interest had to be considerable. The man's bland expression showed no more concern than any other Brit across whose desk Stuyvesant had sat in the last week, but that sharp, uncontrolled reaction was like a tug on a fishing line, alerting the American that something had nibbled his hook.

Then the man's hand dipped into his breast pocket and came out with a leather journal. Cigarillo in one hand, pen in the other, he opened the pages to write half a dozen words. Stuyvesant watched the man's act of nonchalance and thought: *Gotcha!*

Maybe this trip wouldn't be a total wash-up, after all.

Then Carstairs put the journal away, rested the smoking cigar in the desk ash-tray, and stood up, holding out his hand.

Baffled, fighting down a surge of angry disappointment, Stuyvesant rose as well.

"I often walk in Hyde Park, on Saturday mornings," Carstairs told him. "I should like you to join me there tomorrow, near Speakers' Corner. Shall we say, hmm, eleven o'clock? I might have something for you then."

The form was so familiar, a secret meeting held out in the open, that Stuyvesant responded automatically, with a handshake, a thanks for the coffee, a collecting of his papers, and a retrieval of coat and hat from the pasty-faced secretary. Before he knew it, he was out on the street again, where the rain had turned to sleet, and he wondered what had just happened. He glanced down at his hand, reassured by the sight of the tidy sticking-plasters on his knuckle: Without that, he'd wonder if he had been inside this building at all.

Eight days pounding the London streets, fourteen times trotting out his tale of woe and here he was, turned out yet again. The hell with it: If he couldn't get at The Bastard Bunsen through the proper channels, he'd take a more direct approach.

Tomorrow.

Tonight he was going to celebrate the close cooperation of American and British law enforcement by getting drunk.