

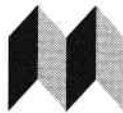
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BLOODY FOREIGNERS

An Inspector Low novel

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MUSWELL
PRESS

CHAPTER 1

Stanley Low stared at the carpet. An airport's carpet defined its country. Fourteen hours earlier, he'd left Changi Airport's carpet. It was new, vibrant, clean and sanitised. The carpet was the work of Asian hands, designed in an Asian country and maintained by migrant labour.

That was Singapore.

The carpet at Heathrow Airport was faded and frayed; once bright and confident, it was now coming away at the edges. Attempts had obviously been made to cover the corners and hide the decay.

This was England.

Huge, garish banners greeted new arrivals. The words of an enthusiastic PR executive were slapped optimistically across Union Jacks.

Britain is Great.

Low considered his own slogan to pass the time.

Britain is History.

His history.

An hour had passed, but the arrivals queue for non-citizens had barely moved. Low watched the Brits swagger through their queue, basking in their inherent superiority, oblivious to the foreigners around them.

‘Stay in line, please; have your passports ready.’

The voice was husky and lyrical and belonged in the Jamaican sunshine. The voice was far too cheery and welcoming for 6 a.m. arrivals at a gloomy airport.

He was round-faced and smiley, a foreigner-turned-British citizen who would always be grateful for a steady job and free healthcare. He had a past. So he had perspective.

‘How much longer? Low asked.

‘It will take as long as it takes,’ the plump immigration officer replied.

‘What does that mean?’

‘Excuse me, sir?’

‘It will take as long as it takes. Does that mean an hour, a day, a week? Should I make plans for Christmas?’

The officer stopped. ‘Are you British, sir?’

‘No. Do I look British?’

‘Well, your accent is . . .’

‘Educated?’

‘No, I just think your English is really good.’

‘Thank you. So is yours.’

The immigration officer paused, as if searching for an explanation for the scruffy, well-spoken Chinese gentleman. Low’s English really was impeccable when it needed to be. But he was tattooed and sweaty. The sight and sound didn’t match.

He was carrying nothing but a passport.

The immigration officer replayed the same thought.

He’s carrying nothing but a passport.

‘Where have you just travelled from, sir?’ the officer asked finally.

‘The toilet. Which was cleaner than this carpet. Maybe you should just let people piss on the carpet and cut the middle man out.’

Chinese faces in the queue turned to face their belligerent countryman.

Low saw the minor explosions in his head, the dizzying, wearying fireworks and took a deep breath, waiting for them to fizzle out.

He heard the words of Dr Tracy Lai.

Count to ten and start again.

He watched the immigration officer nod to a colleague, calling for backup.

'Look, I didn't mean to be sarcastic, OK? It's just that we're all tired, this queue isn't moving and I need to get to an event in central London.'

Low couldn't miss the officer heading towards him, a member of the Aviation Policing Command with the semiautomatic across his vest, the Glock 17 hugging his hipbone and the sculpted biceps peeking through the uniform. Low knew the type. Some wanted to serve the community. Some wanted to serve the American movie forever playing in their heads.

'Is there a problem here, sir?' The Bulging Bicep enquired.

Low rolled his eyes. The crop-headed clown borrowed his lines from shit movies. The soothing words of Dr Tracy Lai faded. The fireworks sparkled and danced. Low was bored and angry. The Bulging Bicep offered a target, a chance to vent.

'No, but I have a question. How do you get muscles like that? Do police stations here have gyms?'

The officer tapped his finger against the side of the trigger of his semiautomatic. He couldn't make sense of the Chinese runt's aggression. The new arrival was engaging in an argument he obviously couldn't win. The officer settled on a routine line of questioning.

'Where are you from, sir?'

'You know where I'm from. I'm standing with three hundred other people who just arrived on the same plane. From Singapore. You've already seen it on my passport. Singapore. And I've got a Chinese face. So, let's consider the facts, shall we? A Chinese guy with a Singaporean passport has just landed on

a Singapore Airlines flight from Singapore. Clearly, I'm from Zimbabwe.'

The officer considered his options. There were eyes everywhere. Foreign passengers. Returning citizens. Fellow officers. Airport staff. Liberal snowflakes. Everyone had an agenda. Everyone had a camera phone. He was white. The twat was Chinese. He had no choice. Stick to the routine line of questioning. Play the robot.

'There's no need for the sarcasm, sir. Where are you staying in the UK?'

'At the London School of Economics, *sir*.'

'You're a university lecturer,' the immigration officer exclaimed.

'Nope.'

'Then what are you?' The police officer spat the words at Low, emphasising his indifference to academia.

'Well, PC Bicep, I am, hold on a second,' he said, fumbling around in his wallet before producing an identity card, 'ah, there we are. I am Detective Inspector Stanley Low from the Singapore Police Force. My wonderful government has sent me here to give some really boring lectures on criminology at the London School of Economics.'

The police officer moved his semiautomatic to one side and examined the card. Even his well-drilled line of questioning had deserted him.

'I didn't expect that,' he mumbled, returning the card. 'You don't look like ...'

'A detective inspector?' Low interrupted. 'No, I look like what I am. An asshole. That's why I'm here.'

CHAPTER 2

Through the pre-dawn fog, Detective Inspector Mistry noticed the two uniforms giggling. Two white men protecting an Asian corpse in Chinatown in front of all those phones. They were stupid, but not malicious. They were scared. Their bullshit made up for a lack of bravado. That's why she was in plain clothes and they were in uniform, standing in the drizzle. Besides, she recognised them from the station. They were almost half her age.

'PC Cook, PC Bishop,' she said, ducking beneath the police cordon.

'Yes, Sergeant,' said Cook, clearing his throat.

'What's so funny, lads?'

'Nothing, Sergeant, just passing the time.'

Cook was the talkative constable, the thicker one. So she glared at the smarter Bishop.

'No, you're making jokes to take your mind off the dead bloke behind you. Look where we are. Fruit and veg deliveries are on their way, wholesalers, then office workers and early-morning tourists. Do you wanna go viral?'

'No, Sergeant,' Cook replied.

Mistry ignored him, still staring at Bishop, still waiting.

'No, Sergeant,' he said finally.

'Good. No one comes in without clearing it with me first, OK? No one.'

Dansey Place was an alleyway like any other in central London, except it was particularly long, running like a discreet artery through Chinatown, feeding the restaurants on either side. The city's wealthiest had surrounded the narrow walkway years ago, with the theatres of Shaftesbury Avenue and Leicester Square's red-carpet premieres a reminder of a world away from fried noodles and chopped garlic.

But Dansey Place's high brick walls blocked out both the sun and the globalised metropolis. Victorian London still reigned here and some things never changed. Strangers were still being stabbed.

Mistry loved London just before dawn. The night owls had dragged their hangovers back to the suburbs. The office minions had yet to arrive. In the in-between hours, London offered the illusion of peace, the promise of something better.

And then, through the fog, it spat out another victim.

Mistry pulled her latex gloves tighter and smiled at a tall, slim man in a dark suit crouching over the body.

'So?'

Detective Constable Tom Devonshire didn't look up. 'Two stab wounds, both in the back, quite close to each other. The surgeon is on his way. Some grit and shit on his hands, blood along the floor, on his face. He put up a fight and tried to escape, poor bastard.'

Mistry crouched beside the dead man. 'Grit and shit?'

Devonshire sighed. 'Yeah, all right. It's five-thirty in the morning, had to sort Ben out and I haven't had any coffee yet.'

'Is he all right?'

'Yeah, he's fine. Hasn't got much choice, has he?'

Mistry moved past the question and focused on the body for the first time. The dead man was young, olive-skinned and remarkably handsome.

Those eyes.

She had seen those eyes too many times before. They always

captured the moment of revelation, a terrifying acceptance that death was on its way. Those eyes had followed her from one murder scene to another. From a rookie homicide detective in Dagenham to running her own murder investigation team at Charing Cross, the eyes always had it.

They saw the end.

But his brown eyes belonged on a puppy dog, not a corpse. They were beautiful. He was a beautiful boy.

‘Such a waste,’ she murmured.

‘Yeah, good-looking bugger,’ Devonshire agreed. ‘With a face like that, he should’ve been on the stage over the road, not in a gang.’

‘You think he was in gang?’

‘He’s a stabbed teenager with a brown face.’

‘I’ve got a brown face.’

Devonshire didn’t take the bait. ‘You know what I mean.’

Mistry flicked her ponytail away from her shoulder and reached for her torch. ‘Nah, I’m not having it.’

‘Look, don’t get all PC about it. They’re happening every day. We had one yesterday, in your bloody neighbourhood.’

‘That was outside the train station. Revenge attack. This is theatreland. Who killed him? A pensioner pissed off she didn’t meet Benedict Cumberbatch at the stage door?’

Devonshire looked over at his boss. ‘Benedict Cumberbatch is playing in the West End?’

‘Shut up. Teenagers don’t kill each other in the theatre district.’

‘This isn’t really the theatre district, is it? It’s Chinatown. And he’s a dead Asian.’

‘He’s Indian. Had an identity card in his wallet.’

‘Meaning he’s Indian?’

‘He’s Singaporean.’

‘What the hell’s a Singaporean Indian? And how would you know?’

Mistry stood up. 'How do you think?'

Devonshire sighed. 'Ah yeah, of course. *Him.*'

Mistry ignored the sarcasm and followed the torchlight along the chipped brickwork. 'He wasn't stabbed against the wall,' she said. 'There's no blood on the walls.'

'Of course not. Rival gang members follow him in to the alley, stab, stab and he's gone.'

The torch stopped moving. The carved letters glowed in the spotlight. Faint blood streaks trailed each letter.

'Oh shit,' Mistry muttered. 'Look at this.'

Devonshire turned and faced the bloodied letters on the wall behind him.

MEGA.

'Yeah, I know,' he said. 'Thought I'd save that for you. Bet you wish it was a gang killing now.'