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Harry Banks was shaking his head as he exited the large conference room which had held the weekly internal co-ordination meeting of MI6 intelligence agency. He was groping his thick, near-white hair which resembled the ungroomed and dishevelled hair of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Unlike Johnson, Banks' hair usually was in some sort of order. He found himself in a particularly irritable mood because his views were once again outnumbered by his colleagues. He was responsible for all field operations in Europe, typically involving dozens of field agents in most of the European countries. He was known to defend his field staff furiously which obviously ended frequently up in verbal swordplay with other heads of departments. Political aspirations together with internal organisational interests and battles for cost reductions, which raged intermittently inside MI6, created a continuous wrangle about what implications debated priorities or risks would have on the field force and their abilities to perform. Banks felt that his authority was again run over from left and right.

Banks returned to his office and treated himself with a chunk of chocolate. He had a weight problem. The issue dated back to his genetic heritage which exposed him to obesity. His father, grandfather and their predecessors were all overweight. Oddly enough, the gene for obesity seemed only to harass the male descendants of the family tree. The females did not inherit such a burden. Banks had another vice as well – chocolate. It was widely known inside the agency that Banks liked chocolate and consumed it every day. Whenever a cause for celebration arose, Banks was rewarded with chocolate. Of course, folks took advantage of his addiction. Sometimes even rudely. They took up the habit of serving him chocolate in every meeting, knowing it was not fair for one suffering from an addiction. Yet Banks never turned down their offerings. He had frequently debated about starting smoking to keep the appetite low but could not get round the fact that he disliked the smoke.

Banks's wife was quite the opposite of him. Helen Banks, a biologist and researcher, was a slim, if not outright skinny, lady with sharpish features. Together they formed an unusual couple, rather a caricature of pairing fat and skinny. They had no

children which was something they had agreed together. Helen showed no interest in having offspring which in turn gave Harry the permission to concentrate fully on spying.

Banks had a long history in MI6. Over 20 years. He was a well-respected, positively sharp and mathematically talented professional. People working for him found it easy to show their respect to him as well, because he always took sides with them and treated everybody with equally strict fairness. If Banks were to have another weakness of character – besides the chocolate addiction – it would be his lack of sense of humour. Not that he did not have any, but he approached his business with seriousness which simply didn't tolerate any nonsense.

Banks was about to treat himself with another well-deserved piece of chocolate when the phone rang.

"Banks", he snapped.

"Having a bad day, are you, Harry?", a direct question in heavily accented German came up from the other end of the line.

"No, damn it, just one of those internal skirmishes, that's all." Even though his German colleague was close to being his friend, Banks did not see it necessary to share any of the disputes within the agency with any representative of foreign governments. Might get indicted with treason for all I know, he mused.

"Dietmar, what's up?" Dietmar Hartmann was his counterpart in BND, the German foreign intelligence agency.

"I'm in the need of assistance concerning a case we have here. Help from MI6, specifically."

"Well, well. So, our impeccable reputation has reached the German territory, what?", Banks chuckled.

"Indeed, yes. I was informed about an art discovery in Wiesbaden, which dates back to World War Two. The incident seems to cause some disturbance. The manager of the Wiesbaden museum has been assaulted and the findings were nearly robbed. He had, however, just turned them over to a Dutch art expert for evaluation, thus avoiding the robbery. It seems now that the bandits are after this Dutch guy."

"I see. Unfortunately, we are not very much in for Dutch art critics."

"Harry, most of those critics are humans."

"Who's behind this assault, any idea?"

"Not much, really, but the museum manager was willing to point his finger towards the Neo-Nazis."

"Hm-mm.", Banks made a reflective sound.

"This art expert is obviously frightened but refuses to receive help from anybody else, except MI6. A foreign citizen, so we are not allowed to enforce him in any way. He even has a name of the person he prefers to rescue him."

"Okay. Who is it?"

"Gerald Ayers. Do you know him?", Hartmann was curious.

"Indeed, I do. But he is not employed by the agency anymore. He retired a few years ago. A good agent, anyway."

"Too bad. Anyway, would you like to take up this case, because he specifically chose to trust your organisation. I just wonder why.", Hartmann teased.

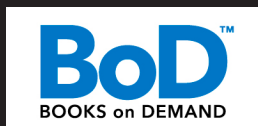
"Okay. I'll see what I can do. Please, send me a report about this plus the contact info for this Dutch guy. I'll get back to you when I have something to tell.", Banks said and glanced at his watch. The next meeting was already waiting.

“Good. We’ll be in touch. Thanks, Harry.”, Hartmann ended the call.



An unobtrusive, plastered stone house, just outside the city of Bonn, housed one of the BND offices. Captain Horst Braun was stationed on the top floor of the four-storey house, reflecting the German organisational top-down hierarchy. Braun was a wiry, sharp and ambitious civil servant with a crew-cut hair and just over 30 years of age. Despite his years, he had a ten-year career in the German military under his belt. But military career was not what he was set out to do in his life, instead he wanted to do something with real purpose. Purpose of concrete nature, that is. For a soldier, the meaning could be fulfilled only by waging a war. He was not, however, able to engage in a suitable scene of war that would have given him a sense of fulfilment. Furthermore, any war included the unpleasant side effect of potentially getting oneself killed. That in itself would not advance any purpose. Consequently, Braun started to look at his options and came to the

Gerald Ayers is an ex-agent of MI6, the British Foreign Intelligence Agency, now retired. When a friend of his late wife, Pieter Arnholt, an art expert, sends a request for help to return an art discovery from the Nazi era, Gerald couldn't leave him in trouble. But soon things turn worse as the Nazis feel entitled to their share of the loot. Gerald finds himself in a dangerous journey through Europe, pursued by enemies, before events come to a dramatic end.



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