

# Noah's Art by JB Dukes

## Chapter 4

Leytonstone, East London

and

Manhattan, New York

April 2000

Two suited men are leaning over a very worn balustrade, one positioned on the stair above the other, looking down onto a scene that hasn't changed for 150 years. Only the dress, conversation and music has changed. The faces definitely not, and the character types they have been having a game with would have been recognisable to any social diarist, journalist or policeman in the era that the Victorian corner pub was built. It is jazz night in The Cricketers and the tiny odd-shaped lounge is full to standing room with those in the know from all walks of life, colour, creed, age and sexuality, so much so that the late comers have had to gather up the stairs that once led to the establishment's second business. You could tell by the grand open-plan oak stairway and the quality of the doors and panelling, that the five bedrooms off the small upstairs landing were made for customers not for the pub's staff.

The rather distinguished silver haired gentleman with intelligent features standing on the higher of the stairs is named Hugo and if he had a counterpart in the equivalent scene 150 years ago, it would have been perhaps, someone high up in the Admiralty. Hugo has just rushed in by cab from a late meeting in MI6 headquarters in Central London.

Brushing away the froth on his mouth from the pint of IPA Best Bitter he has quickly downed, and picking up his wet umbrella that has been hooked on an old gas-light

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fitting, he takes a step down to the same level as his companion and leans into his ear against the discordant din.

“One more thing about this whole affair Nigel. You’ve got to make it work with her. We’ll never get another chance like it. Think knighthoods on retirement. For me if not for you. Whatever’s going on out there, and I’m not joking when I say it’s big – big enough to change things for ever – this network’s our USP. The Yanks know all there is to know and more about Bin Laden’s lot – more about what he’s doing over here than we bloody do. This one’s going to be ours. And if we’ve got it right, it’s a lot more dangerous. See what you can do eh?”

With this, he trots sprightly down a couple of stairs, stops, turns and steps back up to cup a hand against Nigel’s ear again:

“Next time, check your sources please before calling me out of a meeting with the minister. It’s not the first time you’ve given me an urgent call and then been stood up by one of your stooges.”

-0-

“Sorry I’m a little late Dr. Kim. What in Heaven’s name did you do to your forehead?”

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Cassy grimaces, instinctively touching the bruising around the scar and equally instinctively retaliating:

“You don't look brilliant yourself”.

She did not sleep on the overnight flight from London Heathrow to New York's Newark airport but has become unusually alert sitting waiting at the little Italian bistro tucked into a basement on East 57<sup>th</sup> Street next to the day-care centre for dogs. Nigel Buchanan, a sandy-haired Englishman, in his early forties and a public school type, gives out cards identifying him as a British Council official. He also works for MI5 - Britain's domestic intelligence agency - and it is the second time in a month they have met in Manhattan like this. When he has settled into the privacy of the corner table that Cassy has selected, he leans forward, clasps his ginger-coloured hands together and whispers:

“We're borrowing you for intellect – brains and attention to detail - not to get involved in the rough and tumble!”

*The skin on his hands is dry and freckled – I bet he had eczema when he was a child.*

“Thanks for the compliment” she sniffs “but how do you know I didn't fall off a ladder doing DIY?”

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“Because you’ve probably never hung a roll of wall-paper in your life.” Nigel retorts jovially while taking his jacket off and hanging it on the back of his seat. The dry hands are extending from double cuffs turned back and fastened with what appear to be jade links.

*He travels to the East. Dark enough for Burmese Jade.*

It is true. His dossier is thorough.

“And because your friends say you’re out of sorts”, he adds, settling himself into the bistro chair and folding his hands neatly together again on the table. “Whatever’s bugging you, you’re not covering it up very well Dr Kim.”

“What friends?” Cassy snaps suspiciously. She can’t think of many friends at the moment who would be in a position to offer that kind of report. She thinks of the almost one-night-stand she’d had after a disastrous party last weekend and wonders if Nigel had anything to do with it.

“So what happened?” He says, softening and looking her in the eye.

She does her usual thing when someone tries this on and squints to the point of closure. A huntswoman withdrawing into a concealed place observing a dangerous quarry.

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In terse, to-the-point sentences she tells him about the car. It had been stalking her for some time. Once, about a month earlier, as she had pulled out of the garage at the rear of her Victorian terraced house into the small alley, it had been there at the end of the lane. She had sworn, instinctively slammed into reverse, accelerated backwards out of the lane and sped away into the London traffic. A week later she had been driving to her university office in central London and noticed an old white Volvo in her rear-view mirror. It had stayed with her for most of the journey then disappeared.

She had thought she knew why the car was stalking her. It had to be to do with the tapes.

Just before Christmas her house had been done over with the thoroughness of a Customs and Excise rummage team. Whoever did it had let themselves in with no sign of forced entry and left with only two ancient reel-to-reel computer tapes stored in scratched plastic covers plastered with faded sticky labels from the days before floppy and hard disk drives. They were given to her by her doctoral teacher in Cornell and contained novel research data of no great commercial value. Only they didn't only contain her teacher's research data. Hidden away amongst the old data, they also contained a very unusual and very valuable script of computer code. Why had she stored such a valuable piece of work on a computer tape stored on a bookshelf in her living room? Well she had to store the original programme and data trials somewhere. What is safer than the obvious?

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When the car hit her instead of whisking her off to be interrogated, her world had plunged into confusion. She had been preparing herself for the worst, but it hadn't come.

Then there is the MI5 contract she has recently signed – technical 'experts' sign them all the time she had told herself - but there was something missing from it. A Berkeley economics professor called Williamson she had once met at a cocktail reception in LA – she can't remember his first name - had told her that all contracts are incomplete. "What counts is how you manage the resulting ambiguity", he had pronounced. She is now struggling with that - majorly.

*Perhaps Her Majesty's men are softening me up. After all, although it was a deliberate hit and run, on reflection, it was a controlled bump.*

She had not quite seen it like that before. She re-runs her memory of the white Volvo, reinterpreting and nods, recalling how exactly the car impacted her.

Cassy has come to New York hoping that her conversation with Nigel Buchanan might make things a little less messy. She has come to clear up the ambiguity but her thoughts make her even more confused. She senses a new reason to fear.

*What do you really want from me Mr Buchanan?*

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She looks up at Buchanan expecting an answer. Instead, his response is to quiz her on which of her recent cases at Scotland Yard might have won her enemies.

He has seen her CV. He has interviewed her on it. He had asked why she took up the part time forensic position at Scotland Yard and he seemed to believe her. Said he was beginning to understand her. She had believed his sincerity then. Even warmed to him. And now, again, she finds him convincing. She closely observes his eyes, his minor facial muscles and his hands as he speaks. She is good at this and concludes that he is genuine on this subject at least: he knew nothing about the Volvo incident before she mentioned it.

Once she has made this conclusion she switches her thoughts to the real purpose of the meeting – a breakfast appointment the next day with a man she assumes is with the CIA.

“We’re grateful of course that you’re going to help us.” Nigel is saying, reaching down for his briefcase and pulling out some papers.

“Here’s an English version of the air accident investigator’s report on the first crash. It happened almost exactly six years ago. April 1994. Take a look at the page marked with a yellow sticky.”

She takes the spiral-bound document and thumbs through.

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“Two members of the Russian parliament were on board.” He says casually as she reads.

Finishing the paragraph he has highlighted in pink marker, she says “A Russian plane blown out of the sky over Northern Iran?”

“By Noah's Ark.” He says, as though it explains everything.

“The toy was stained with RDX and PTN residue,” she reads, understanding the acronyms very well.

“Chemicals left after a Semtex explosion.”

It is probably naïve male condescension but it makes her angry. Instead of lashing out as she once would have, however, she switches off inside. She learned the trick from her teenage psychiatrist and although it makes her less of a sociopath, she is fully aware that it only really shifts the alienation from one level to another.

“And the American International Airways disaster last autumn has been linked to a crackpot with a map of Mount Ararat pinned on his wall?” she continues flatly, scanning the report. “Sounds a tenuous connection to me.”

“It wasn't just the map” Nigel counters “– his computer was full of stuff downloaded from Web sites about Noah's Ark and *ark*-aeological controversies.”



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“And I'm the closest you have to a tame Ark specialist? Who on earth dreams up these bloody assignments?” She is in a particularly disdainful mood today, which is aggravating her growing sense that it was a big mistake to sign the MI5 contract.

“You were a scientist on the Anglo-US study.”

“ Five years ago and I was employed to analyse pictures from spy-satellites.”

“But you keep up with developments and you'll have as good idea as any of who's out there taking it all too seriously.”

She looks at him without saying anything for a moment, *How the hell does he know I 'keep up with development's?*

“Why would anyone interested in that kind of thing be into terrorism?” She parries dismissively.

She is now eyeing him with undisguised suspicion, bordering on hostility and in her mind she is thinking about getting up and walking out – ending it here and now. But she knows she won't do that. She needs answers from this man and those he represents and without him she will just have questions. Questions and a split forehead.

“We want you to look at the archaeological data used by different groups”, Nigel is saying. “Tell us how they might have gained access to them, how much money you

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think is going into their research; evidence of fanaticism of one kind or other - that sort of thing. We're looking for leads, that's all."

He had told Cassy this using exactly the same words at their first meeting with the American they are due to meet again the following day. Nigel seems to repeat himself a lot, she has noticed. That meeting had taken place in a disused hotel restaurant on the twentieth floor of a grubby tower in uptown Manhattan. Cassy had been distracted for most of the time by a group of workmen perched perilously on the roof of the Roosevelt Island cable car. They had travelled back-and-forth, apparently doing nothing but chatting and pouring each other coffee from flasks. Eventually they had stripped off to their boxers and changed from blue to orange overalls. It was a bizarre but entertaining ritual that had occupied most of Cassy's attention so that she could recall very little of what the man in the suit had said.

What she *had* learned was that a routine check of phone-tap archives had thrown up a surprise association. In a transcript taken from an East London apartment being watched in a people-smuggling case, there was a brief and ambiguous mention of American International Airways outbound flight AIA916 from JFK to Bombay via Munich - two weeks before it exploded meters above the Bomay runway, killing all on board. A raid on the apartment turned up nothing except for the occupant's Noah's Ark interest and someone had remembered reading the report of the earlier plane crash and drawn a connection. It was an obscure one. The Noah's Ark toy in the earlier plane wreckage could easily have just been in a suitcase close to the bomb.

"The London apartment was rented by a Russian student." Nigel Buchanan continues.

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“Oh?” This is new information.

“He was under investigation for Russian Organised Crime connection – ROC in the trade.’ People-smuggling is only part of it. London’s a busy place these days for my profession. Take a look at this.”

He shoves a few sheets of fax paper across the table. Cassy recognises them as a copy of a report she has already received by post about some Iraqi visitors to London. She looks at Nigel as if reassessing him. More than once he had lost his train of thought in mid-sentence without seeming to notice. *Domestic or personality problems?*

*Probably both.* She picks up the British Council business card he has courteously just passed to her – clearly a habit, like hanging a hat on a hook, since he had done the same at their last meeting.

The Council, she knows to be a made-over remnant of the old British Empire machinery, marketing British culture, industry and education all over the world. From its headquarters in Manchester it runs offices in most of the world’s major cities and is widely regarded as a kind of cultural diplomatic service. In her imagination it is also a cover for all sorts of intelligence-gathering activities. She recalls that it has ‘desks’ like the intelligence agencies - the North Africa desk, the South American desk, the Central Asian desk. Nigel, she has discovered from her preparatory research, has an administrative desk somewhere on the top floor of the building that houses the part of the Council that remained in London after most staff had been relocated to England’s Northern capital. From there, she imagines him managing an international

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network of intelligence-gatherers - British Council employees and their contacts, generating up-to-the-minute security assessments on matters of interest to MI5.

*Or perhaps MI5 just rents space in the building.*

“Why did you send me the report?” she asks accusingly.

“You need to know the lie of the land Cassandra my dear. Consider this a background briefing.”

*So he knows he sent me the report already. Repetition must be de rigueur in this business. Perhaps he monitors variations in my responses to his repetitions.*

But she is saying something different to her thoughts: “The Iraqis have something to do with the two plane crashes?”

“No. It's another case entirely. We've been working hard to keep Iraqi factions out of London. It might open your eyes to the way these people work – might help you spot some *patterns* on your new assignment.”

It is a joke. Although Cassy lectures and practises forensic archaeology, her specialism is the numerical analysis of digital image patterns. Or as one of her colleagues once put it, writing programs to find needles in digital haystacks. When she isn't at the university she is in a police laboratory secreted away in the middle of one of London's suburban forests or at the headquarters of some European police

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force or other. It has become routine and after a time, rather boring – Dr Kim is called in when a farmer ploughs up a pile of bones; or a grave pattern needs picking out from air photos; or an unprovenanced ancient artefact turns up on the international ancient art market. She once helped locate a mass grave in Kosovo and has analysed rather too many images of the Irish and Northern Spanish countryside for earth-forms that might give away the location of weapons dumps.

“Thousands of overseas students study in London, as you well know, Dr. Kim” Nigel is saying. “Most are *bona fide* scholars - some are not. The British government doesn't generally concern itself with the strengths of its visitors' scholastic aptitude or motivation - it leaves that to the universities. It does, however, take an interest in who pays for their education and what else they might be getting up to while they're here. There's no better way to get a certain kind of spy, agitator or terrorist into a western country for a prolonged stay. Western security agencies are aware of this and deploy their resources accordingly. We have people working in the universities monitoring undesirable networks among students, you know.”

“I didn't realise,” She says, although she guessed this must be the case.

“Just look at the pattern in the report.”

“It's always possible to find a pattern,” she says pedantically. “The real skill is knowing whether it's significant or occurs by chance”.

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“Quite,” he says, considering that technical detail for a second, “- but look at the chap with a Syrian passport.”

The *pattern* comprises suspicious configurations of names, acquaintances, travel histories and London and American addresses.

“He's had two stints in France on French language courses at the same level, one in Paris one in Marseilles. Don't all Syrians speak French anyway? He studied engineering for a year at a University in Paris and is now registered for a Masters degree in London. If he's the person we think he is, he got a chemical engineering degree from a Baghdad university in the early eighties.”

*He is artfully drawing me in. This is interesting.* A mild shot of adrenaline associated with the thought warms her blood. Cassy has had suspicions about certain students but is sobered to hear it as directly as this. She lets go of some of the distance she has placed between them, cross with herself for her emotional volatility.

“And the Egyptian with an Iraqi father,” he continues, “Who does he expect to fool with this kind of background? He's got a maths degree from Cairo, spent three years in the Egyptian army before buying himself out. Went to Florida to study artificial intelligence but according to the University had to return home for personal reasons. Then he turns up again registered for a PhD in computer security in Edinburgh and the same thing happens. He got a six-month break in studies to sort out finances. Look...”

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Nigel stabs the photocopied letter from the Scottish university with the end of a dessertspoon.

“Must think we Brits have our eyes closed. I’ll have the dates checked with immigration and the airlines. It’s no wonder we’ve got foreign operatives walking in and out of our country for work experience”.

She actually smiles at this and feels even more cross with herself. But she is liking the confidence Nigel is extending to her – and the secrecy of the whole thing.

There are three other suspects in Nigel’s report. All have proven connections with Osama Bin Laden during his early days in Saudi Arabia. Two are known to work for one of Saddam Hussein’s intelligence networks. All have taken lodgings in the inner city London neighbourhood called Leytonstone and two were in San Francisco during the same month last year. Three of them are post-graduate students.

“The girl in the Human Extinction Front’s publicity stunt was a student in London.”

Cassy says abruptly, changing the subject.

“The BBC news bulletin?” Nigel looks up from the letter but continues to prod at it with the spoon. “It wasn’t a publicity stunt and the girl wasn’t from London.”

“But the Front claimed responsibility – that makes it a PR exercise.”

“That’s what the newsreader said.” Nigel says dryly, “The girl really did dump the

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chemicals - caught in the act by a water engineer. She pulled out a gun; but instead of firing at him, stuck it in her mouth.”

“She's in custody?”

“No, she's in a morgue.”

“She killed herself?” Cassy says, shocked, “Why would she do that?”

“That indeed is a mystery. No-one has a clue who she was – she wasn't on the list of known HEF members. All we know is that she had a fake passport and a lot of money in her rucksack.”

“Well it certainly wasn't payment for doing HEF's dirty work. Contractors don't turn a gun on themselves to avoid capture. How much money?”

“Quarter of a million dollars in hundred dollar bills.”

Cassy nods, as though in approval.

“Which brings me back to the Iraqis.” Nigel says. “Right now, too much money is moving around the world and landing in the hands of bad people. In the past two weeks we've intercepted two Pakistani secret service agents with Bin-Laden connections trying to enter the country. That's one a week. One came in the back of a lorry on a ferry from northern Spain, posing as a Kurdish refugee. The other flew



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business class from Beijing via Guangzhou, Bangkok and Frankfurt and carried a Yemeni passport. His documents show him married to a Filipino nurse working in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Both had well stocked British bank accounts waiting for them.”

“Background briefing?” Cassy asks, in a tone requiring confirmation that this isn't something she is meant to follow up.

“Unless someone discovers that the Iraqis are into Noah's Ark too. You can keep that,” he says, nodding to the fax she already has a copy of, “and you might want to study this”. He reaches into his case again and produces a plastic folder, which he hands to her solemnly.

“It's the passenger list of the downed AIA flight.”

His body language suggests that he has said all he wants to on the subject and it appears that the purpose of the meeting has been to introduce her to the twilight world from which her assignment has originated. She assumes she will need the insights for tomorrow's meeting. Perhaps the purpose has also been subtler than that - she feels like an *initiate*, implicated by shared confidence into something that is less than fully legal.

“There was a matter you wanted to raise?” He adds as he picks up and opens a menu.

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Cassy had phoned Nigel from Heathrow to tell him that she wanted to check something out before the meeting with the CIA man.

"I want your opinion." Cassy says. "I had an email a few days after we were last here. Could be a hoax or a joke." She is awkward admitting she needs his opinion. It has always been a problem for her.

In truth she thinks it might have come from his department or from the Americans, though she can't see why they would want to give her an anonymous lead to work from.

"Saying?"

"The 120 years warning is about to be given."

There had been a second line too but Cassy doesn't mention it. She never puts all her cards on the table if she can help it.

He raises an eyebrow.

"Sender?"

"Untraceable"

"A name?"

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*"Cleito"*

There is an unmistakable reaction - a momentary tensing of his jaw, a microscopic flicker in a facial muscle. She had been waiting for it and it came. He had been about to waive the waiter over but puts the menu back down.

"Dramatic." He says. "Junk mail?"

"Cultish." She replies. "But not SPAM."

"Forget about it. Forward me a copy and I'll see if we can trace the sender. Probably one of your students playing a prank. Any of them read Plato?"

The conversation over, he flags down the lanky Italian teenager who has been keeping a discreet distance - it seems to be that sort of restaurant - and turns his attention to ordering.

A smartly dressed young couple step into the restaurant, shaking wet umbrellas as they hand coats to another waiter. Back in England it has been a funny spring. It started off unusually mild and everyone had hoped for a repeat of the April heat wave of the previous year. Instead, winter had returned with a vengeance. Unseasonable snow and floods dominated the news bulletins. People had died and normal life had been interrupted with predictably chaotic results.

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Nigel Buchanan sits very still watching Cassy Kim's low-slung hips rock hypnotically as she makes her way to the restroom at the back of the restaurant. She has removed her winter coat to reveal a figure-hugging cashmere dress with a high neck, no sleeves and dropping elegantly in one piece and without a waistband to just above the knees. He lets his gaze shift to the pleasing curves of her bare shoulders and the two and a half wavelengths of light but firm female muscle giving shape to her arms. *So – Hugo was right about her. We're going to have to keep a much closer watch. Who the hell sent her that email?*



Cassy arrives back at her hotel on Park Avenue, tired, cold, wet - and curious. She is glad that she hadn't given Nigel the complete email message. The second line had read:

*Queen Boudicca's London Camp, May 20th - 16.00 hours*

The fiercely independent spirit that is a familiar friend from the past stirs within. In the stifling police culture of Scotland Yard's forensic team she rarely gets the opportunity to see a problem yield to her full creativity and certainly not to her full cunning. It has got her into trouble before, but she yields to the beckoning recklessness as to a new lover of unproven provenance.

*I'll be following up Queen Boudicca on my own, thank you Mr. Nigel bloody Buchanan. So you made me like you with all the secrecy stuff. But I see through you.*

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*If it's a game, then just make sure you don't mess with my mind ok? I can do the rest,  
but I need to be in control of me ok? That's what I do. See through people. I'm  
guessing that's why you hired me.*