THE ROB SINCLAIR COLLECTION

A COMPLETE INTRODUCTION TO ROB SINCLAIR’S BESTSELLING THRILLERS
INTRODUCTION

FROM THE AUTHOR, ROB SINCLAIR

Thank you for discovering my writing! Access the Table of Contents on your reading device to view the full list of contents of this Collection, which includes introductions to three of my bestselling series as well as a standalone psychological thriller.

Dance With The Enemy

Continue to the next section to start reading Dance With The Enemy, the action-packed and gripping first instalment in the highly-acclaimed and bestselling Enemy series of espionage thrillers featuring Carl Logan.

The Red Cobra

The direct follow-on to the Enemy series is the explosive and internationally bestselling James Ryker series, starting with The Red Cobra. This fast-paced book will appeal
to readers of big-hitting thrillers by the likes of Lee Child and David Baldacci, and has echoes in its plotting and breadth of the globe-trotting spy thriller I Am Pilgrim. Use the Table of Contents on your reading device to skip ahead to the first eight chapters of this acclaimed thriller!

**Sleeper 13**

Homeland meets The Bourne Identity in this utterly fresh, action-packed thriller that has been described as ‘one of the most intense and engrossing thrillers of the last decade’, and the start of the Sleeper 13 series. Use the Table of Contents on your reading device to skip ahead to the first chapters of this breathtaking and globetrotting thriller!

**Dark Fragments**

If you’d like an edge of your seat thriller about money, murder, and revenge, try Dark Fragments. Filled with mystery, suspense and action, this Amazon Top 50 best seller will appeal to readers of psychological thrillers, as well as a broad section of crime, thriller and action fans.

Thank you for reading! I hope you love this introduction to my work. To see a full list of my books or purchase a full-length novel, including Dance With The Enemy, The Red
Cobra, Sleeper 13, and Dark Fragments, click on the link below:

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All the best

Rob Sinclair
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**The Enemy Series:**
Dance with the Enemy
Rise of the Enemy
Hunt for the Enemy

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The Black Hornet
The Silver Wolf
The Green Viper
The White Scorpion

**The Sleeper 13 Series:**
Sleeper 13
Fugitive 13
Imposter 13

Dark Fragments
Dance with the Enemy

THE ENEMY SERIES
BOOK 1

Rob Sinclair
They say that before you die your whole life flashes before you. But nobody can know for sure what happens in those moments before death. If you do see your life flashing before your eyes, does that mean you’ve got no chance? And if it doesn’t, does that mean you’re going to be okay?

Carl Logan didn’t know. Five months ago, on the day he almost died, no bright light had been calling him in, no images from his childhood flickering through his mind. There had been only pain and suffering.

Logan had been on his last breath. His brain had submitted. His body, too. He shouldn’t have been alive. But after his heart had beaten its last beat, it had beaten one more time. And then it had beaten again. And it had kept on going.

It hadn’t been his time to go.

But he hadn’t been saved. Not by a long stretch.
Maybe the psychologist had been right. Maybe he was an addict. Who else would put themselves in these positions willingly? Knowingly?

He had the man in a hammerlock. It was a classic submission hold. Its ease of application, and the fact it could be used from an upright position, meant it was a favoured hold of bouncers and law enforcement the world over. Logan was in neither of those professions,

but it was a move that he had found to suit many purposes nonetheless.

He pulled the man’s wrist further up toward the shoulder, feeling the resistance as the shoulder joint was pushed to bursting point. The man let out a yelp at what was becoming an inevitable outcome. His friends, just five yards in front of Logan at the other end of the bar, continued to look on, forming a physical barrier between Logan and where he wanted to be - the exit.

‘Move out of my way. Now,’ Logan said. ‘Don’t think for a second I won’t do it.’

Despite the threat, the man’s three friends stood their ground. They weren’t about to back down. But they weren’t looking like they were about to make a move either. For now, it was a stand-off. Neither side wanted to take it to the next level.
Yet.

Logan looked them over, one by one. Rednecks would be a harsh way to describe them. They were probably just average working guys letting off steam on a weekend; albeit guys who were bulked up through steroids and overuse of weights, and fuelled by alcohol and God knows what else. Each one of them was big and menacing. And judging by the non-situation that had started this, they were looking for a fight tonight.

And for no sane reason, other than he was who he was, Logan was prepared to grant them their wish. He wasn’t the tallest or the strongest guy in the world, but he could handle himself just fine. Despite the odds, he still fancied his chances against this lot.

‘I warned you,’ Logan said.

He pulled the man’s wrist further, as hard and as fast as he could, pushing against the resistance until he heard the tell-tale pop as the man’s arm dislocated from the shoulder. The way it suddenly flopped in his hand told Logan it had probably dislocated at the elbow too. The man shrieked in pain and slumped to the floor as Logan let go, readying himself for the next stage of his latest battle.

The three friends, wide-eyed and staring, looked shocked at what had just happened. Maybe their macho stand-offs didn’t normally go this far. And yet they continued to stand their ground. Logan was a little surprised by that.

But then he saw it. The man on the left. It was nothing more than a flinch. Maybe just a twitch, even. But it was enough for Logan. Enough to tell him that this wasn’t over yet. And that man was now his next focus.

But just as Logan was about to leap forward, something unexpected happened.

He heard the noise before he felt anything. A dull thud. He was on his knees before the searing pain in the back of his leg took hold. Then came the thud again. This time pain shot across his back.

In an instant, unable to stop himself, he was face down on the floor.
He tried to stand up, but the combination of whisky and whatever had just hit him was too much. Instead, he just lay there, hearing the thuds that kept on coming. Feeling the pain with each strike, but unable to muster a response. He saw boots crowding around him. Saw them pulling back and kicking him. Pulling back and kicking. The thuds kept on coming across his back.

He took a boot to the face and felt his lip open up, blood pouring into his mouth. The blows kept on coming but Logan didn’t move. He wasn’t sure he could anymore. He closed his eyes, wondering how things had gone so wrong this time. Maybe he was losing it. Maybe he had never really got it back. He had been out of action for too long. Five months had gone by now since his last fateful assignment. Five months of hell.

His mind began to wander, his awareness of the blows raining down on him fading. Before consciousness left him, he felt a slither of an unlikely smile form on his face.

The psychologist was right. He was an addict.

But it wasn’t the fighting that he was addicted to. It wasn’t the pain either - he was no masochist. Too many years had gone by living a life that wasn’t a life at all. He didn’t want to be their machine anymore. He couldn’t. That was his addiction - the clamour for some sort of normality. He just wanted to live and to feel like everyone else did. Nights like this, in a twisted logic that made sense only to him, allowed him that.

He just wanted to be normal.

And yet he knew that would never be the case.
Chapter 2

4th October

The motorcade edged along the Voie Georges Pompidou on the banks of the Seine, heading back toward the American Embassy. Three identical black Escalades, one after the other, the vehicles almost twice as heavy as regular models due to the extensive armouring. Six agents from the United States Foreign Service were in the three cars, each of them armed, carrying SIG Sauer P229 pistols with twelve-round magazines.

It was heavy protection. But it needed to be.

The Foreign Service was responsible for running all of the US foreign embassies, consulates and missions. Its special agents were responsible for the safety and security of visiting US diplomats, amongst other duties. Today, the special agents attached to Paris were assigned to protect Frank Modena, the eighty-third Attorney General of the United States of America.

The official threat level for Modena’s trip was minimal, but the embassy had insisted on taking necessary precautions given the high-profile nature of his visit. Everyone in the world knew of the subject matter that he had come here to talk about. And almost everyone had a strong view on it.

Modena, a well-built, silver-haired man, was sitting in the back of the second Escalade, along with his much
younger assistant, Laura. The midday traffic was heavy and they meandered along, passing some of the most famous sites of Paris - of Europe. Undoubtedly, the road they were on passed along what was one of the most spectacular riverfronts in the world, with its rich history and eclectic mix of buildings. In the world’s capital of romance, the River Seine, and all it had to offer, was the epicentre.

All of this was lost on Modena, however, who was deep in his own thoughts, reflecting on the speech he had just given to a room full of delegates from across the world. All things considered, it hadn’t been at all bad.

Modena’s eye caught a young couple, strolling along the riverbank, arm in arm. They stopped and embraced each other. Together with the scene that surrounded them, the iconic buildings and leafy parks, it was like something straight out of an art-house film. It sparked thoughts in Modena’s head about what the evening’s antics with his assistant, Laura, might entail. But he had no intention of heading out for a romantic walk. Everything he wanted to -night would be found within his luxurious hotel suite. He glanced over at Laura and caught her eye. She gave him a meek smile then looked away coyly. Gazing out the window, she lifted up the skirt on her leg just a little, as if she knew exactly what he had been thinking. Modena felt the rumblings of arousal begin.

But his daydreaming was rudely cut short when, without warning, the driver slammed on the brakes and the vehicle came to a sudden stop. Modena shot forward, his belt catching and jolting him back into his seat.

‘Jesus, Bridges!’ Modena shouted to his driver. ‘What the hell was that?’

‘Sorry, sir. The car in front stopped suddenly. Looks like an accident up ahead.’

Modena tutted and rubbed the back of his neck. He’d not taken to Bridges at all. The guy looked barely old enough to drive, never mind be a special agent. He was tall and fair-haired, all skin and bone. Not exactly a threatening presence. Where did they even get these kids from?
Modena carried on nursing his neck. He had an old whiplash injury from a previous car accident. Even after six years, any unexpected movement sent waves of pain through his upper spine.

‘Sorry, sir,’ Bridges said again.

‘That’s okay,’ Modena said without conviction. He leaned his head into the middle of the two front seats so that he could see out through the windscreen. But he couldn’t see what was up ahead. They had come to a stop only inches from the first of the three cars in the motorcade, which was now blocking the view. ‘What do you think the problem is?’

‘Can’t really see,’ said Carlson, the agent in charge of the convoy, who was sitting next to Bridges. ‘But there are some flashing lights up ahead and Roberts just called over to say there’s a crash up front on the Place de la Concorde.’

Carlson was everything Bridges was not. Ex-military, he was stocky with a furrowed brow and chiselled face. He looked like he meant business and he looked like he’d seen it all. Modena had liked him immediately. Probably because he was the kind of man Modena wanted to be seen as, rather than the pen-pusher that he really was.

Modena heard sirens coming from behind. He turned to look out of the back window and saw an ambulance trying to come through. But the traffic was too tight and the cars were struggling to move out of the way to let it pass.

Slowly, the cars directly in front began to pull to the side. After the lead Escalade had squeezed forward, Bridges did the same and mounted the kerb to allow the ambulance to pass.

The ambulance came to a stop again just past the front Escalade. Modena assumed the cars further in front were still blocking the way.

‘Idiots,’ Bridges muttered. ‘I never understand why people can’t just do the simple thing and pull over so they can get past.’

Carlson huffed in agreement.
Two police motorcycles came up behind the ambulance and they too were now stuck. Modena moved forward in his seat to get a better look. The ambulance was still just past the first Escalade, its lights and sirens still blaring. The motorbikes were parked one behind the other, right outside Modena’s window.

After a few moments, the back doors to the ambulance opened.

‘Looks like they’ve had enough,’ Modena said.

But he did a double-take as the doors opened fully to reveal two figures dressed from head to toe in black. They had balaclavas over their heads, leaving just their eyes and mouths exposed.

Modena’s mind began to race as he tried to figure out what was wrong with the scene. ‘What the hell is going on here?’ he said, a fraction of a second before it clicked.

‘Oh shit!’ was all Carlson could say as the two figures lifted assault rifles to their chests.

‘Get down!’ Bridges screamed at Modena.

The two figures from the ambulance opened fire on the front Escalade, but Modena, stunned, was unable to react. The thudding sound from the volley of fire seemed to reverberate through his entire body. His world in slow motion, he turned to see the man who had been on one of the motorcycles walking toward the third Escalade. The other was pointing a gun directly at Modena. They both opened fire on their targets and Modena jumped as the bullets ricocheted off the armoured vehicle.

‘Oh my God!’ Modena shrieked. ‘We’re under attack! Jesus! We’re under attack!’

All around, pedestrians began to scream and run for cover. Some of the people in the cars in front and behind were jumping from their vehicles and running too.

Modena finally put his head down to his knees. It was only then that he heard Laura crying in terror next to him. ‘Frank, what’s going on?!’

Modena didn’t respond.

‘We need immediate assistance!’ Carlson shouted into his radio. ‘Repeat, we need immediate assistance! We’re
taking heavy fire! Bridges, you have to try to get us out of here.

Modena couldn’t keep his head down any longer. He had to know what was going on. He lifted his head again just as Bridges put the Escalade into reverse and pressed the accelerator. The car jerked backward two yards, crunching into the front of the third car. He pushed the stick into drive and they lurched forward three yards into the front car. He carried out the same manoeuvre again, trying to create enough of an angle to get them out. The other two cars remained stationary, their drivers making no apparent attempt to move away from the danger.

Modena wasn’t sure if that was out of choice or because they were already dead.

After the initial round of fire at Modena’s vehicle, both of the motorbike gunmen were now firing on the third Escalade. The two ambulance men were still firing on the front car. In the momentary respite, Modena couldn’t help but feel a wave of relief, despite the predicament.

‘What are we going to do?’ he shouted.

‘Just stay calm,’ Carlson shouted back, sounding anything but. ‘And keep your head down!’

‘We’re armoured, right? They can’t get us. Right?’

‘Look, we’re armoured, but those rifles will cut through here eventually. These vehicles aren’t made for heavy fire. We have to get away from them.’

Modena, ignoring Carlson’s instruction, kept his head up to see what was happening. He watched as the front passenger door of the first Escalade opened and an agent fell out onto the ground. Modena’s first thought was that the agent was already dead. But then he hauled himself up against the wheel arch, trying to give himself some cover from the attackers at the opposite side of the car, his gun held at his chest. The ambulance men must have seen him escape the car, though. While one continued to fire on the vehicle, the other made his way cautiously to the front of the car.

Modena heard the crash as the glass on the driver’s side of the first car gave way. He looked on in horror as the at-
tacker moved forward, still firing on the stricken agent in the driver’s seat. Seconds later, with the driver of the first vehicle surely dead, the attacker turned his attention to Modena’s vehicle and began firing again – aiming low for the bonnet.

Bridges tried again to manoeuvre enough space to get out. ‘Just once more should do it!’ he said, desperation in his voice.

The agent who had escaped the front car was still hunkered behind its wheel arch. With a sudden head of steam, he stood up, firing his weapon at the second ambulance man who was just a few yards from him at the front of the vehicle. One of the shots hit the attacker in the shoulder and he stumbled backward. But the agent hadn’t been quick enough and the attacker had managed to get off four rounds with the rifle. The agent could do nothing as each of the bullets hit his mid-section. Modena watched in horror as the bullets tore right through him, four neat exit holes appearing in his jacket, arranged in a cluster, only inches apart.

Almost in slow motion, the agent’s lifeless body slumped onto the ground in a heap.

Laura let out a whimper at the sight of the agent going down. Both Carlson and Modena turned to her in unison.

‘For God’s sake, get down and stay down!’ Carlson screamed at them both.

Laura did as she was told, but Modena was frozen. Bridges finally managed to manoeuvre enough space to get out. He pressed the accelerator all the way down and the car shot toward the first ambulance man, who only just managed to jump out of the way. The Escalade, with nowhere to go, crashed into the back of the ambulance. Bridges carried on stamping on the accelerator, the engine revving and the tyres screeching, sending up plumes of thick smoke. But the ambulance didn’t move an inch.

He looked behind and started to reverse. Modena looked behind as well. In addition to the two abandoned motorbikes, which were now directly behind them, there was also a panel van that had pulled up about ten yards
behind them, blocking any planned exit. The Escalade swept backward and knocked the first motorbike clean out of the way. There was a crash as they hit the second motorbike, which was pushed along, caught on their rear bumper. But their escape was cut short once more as they crashed into the stationary van.

Modena was thrown back against his seat and felt the jolt of pain surge through his neck again. This time, he didn’t even think about nursing his injury. Bridges pounded as hard as he could on the accelerator, but the van wasn’t going to be moved. He then tried desperately to put the car back into drive, jolting the gear lever in and out, in and out, pressing his foot down hard on the accelerator each time he did so. Each attempt let out a low-pitched whine, but produced no movement.

‘There’s no power!’ Bridges shouted, still pushing the gear stick in and out of drive, but to no avail. ‘The engine - it’s dead!’

‘Okay. We need another route out of here,’ Carlson said, his voice still calm and steady, unlike those of the other occupants. ‘If we get out your side, you can provide covering fire while I move the rest of us away.’

Modena, hearing the agents’ conversation but paying no attention to their words, looked to his right. The windows of the third Escalade, with which they were now parallel, had caved in, just like the first. The two agents in the front were motionless, their faces bloodied and bowed.

‘Oh God, no,’ Modena said, putting his hand to his mouth.

And then, just as it had been at the start, everything went silent. A deathly silence. No screaming, no shots ringing out now. But Modena’s mind was racing too much to understand why.

Was he already dead?

In the silence, Laura looked up again. Tears were streaming down her face, leaving a trail of black from her mascara. She let out another whimper and flung her head into Modena’s lap. Her boss didn’t react, just looked on aghast at the scene of carnage in front of them.
The four assailants were crowded around the front of Modena’s car. Their weapons were still drawn but they were no longer firing. Carlson and Bridges looked at each other then back out at the gunmen without saying a word.

‘You have ten seconds to get out of the vehicle,’ one of the armed men shouted. The leader, Modena assumed. He was speaking in English, with what Modena thought was a southern English accent. Modena hadn’t expected that. It seemed out of place. ‘Ten seconds or we start firing again. And you can see what happened to your friends.’

‘What the hell are we going to do?’ Modena said.

Carlson and Bridges looked at each other again. They were both armed. But they weren’t in a position to fight these men, who had both superior numbers and superior weapons.

‘I don’t think we have much choice,’ Carlson said. ‘We do as they say. There’s no sign of any help coming in the next ten seconds and we’re not exactly equipped to fight these guys.’

‘A minute ago you said we should get out,’ Bridges said. ‘I’ll cover you. We can still do that.’

‘It’s too late!’ Carlson snapped. ‘We should do what they say.’

‘No,’ Bridges said, shaking his head. ‘We have to try to fight. It’s what we’re trained to do. There’s only four of them.’

‘And how do you suggest we do that? There are four assault rifles aimed at us. As soon as we made a move, it’d be over.’

‘Our job is to fight. If we go out there, they’ll just kill us anyway,’ Bridges said.

‘No, our job isn’t to fight, it’s to protect.’

‘Giving up isn’t the same thing as protecting.’

‘It’s the only choice we have.’

The confidence now exuded by Bridges surprised Modena. Maybe he’d been wrong about the young agent. But he had to side with Carlson on this one. The thought of running out there in a volley of fire was making him feel naus-
euous. The path of least resistance would be his choice every time.

Carlson, taking the lead, put his hand on the door handle, opened his door and stepped out. Bridges hesitated but then put his hand to his door and began to open it. Modena and Laura looked at each other, wide-eyed. Neither made a move for their doors.

‘Keep your hands in the air!’ the leader of the armed men said.

Carlson did as he was told and stood up straight, facing toward the men.

‘I’m Special Agent Carlson of the US Foreign Service. I’m responsible for these passengers. What’s going on here? What do you want?’

‘What do we want?’ the leader said, sniggering. ‘Not you.’

He pulled his weapon up and squeezed off one shot. The bullet hit Carlson in the middle of his face, creating an exit wound in the back of his head the size of an orange. Blood, flesh and bone splattered onto the Escalade and all around as Carlson’s body fell to the ground.

Laura put her hand to her mouth and gave a muffled scream. Bridges, reacting on instinct, quickly shut his door again. He turned and began to move toward Carlson’s door to try to shut that too. But he had no chance. One of the attackers was already there, his rifle pointed through the open door at the agent’s head.

Bridges looked up into the barrel of the gun.

‘Please …’

But before he could say another word, the attacker fired. The bullet hit Bridges in his temple as he tried to turn away. The high-calibre round at close range was like a baseball bat smashing a watermelon. Bridges’s head all but exploded, thick liquid and mushy flesh covering the inside of the car, Laura and Modena, who both screamed and immediately started clawing at their face and clothes, trying to remove the mess.

Taking just a second to readjust, the attacker moved his rifle toward Laura and fired again. The sound in the
confined space was deafening. Modena shuddered, his ears ringing, his head going into a spin. Disorientated, he shot out of his seat as Laura’s bloodied, limp body fell into his lap. He crawled up against the inside of the car, trying to get as far away as he could. As he fumbled for the door handle, the ringing still in his ears, he couldn’t take his eyes off Laura’s lifeless body. The mess of bone, blood and flesh that used to be her face.

Finally, his hand grasped the handle and the door came open. He tumbled out onto the ground, gasping for air. Barely a second later he was dragged to his feet by one of the attackers.

‘Please. Please don’t kill me,’ Modena begged, putting his hands together in prayer. ‘Please, I have a family.’

‘We’re not going to kill you, Frank,’ the leader said matter-of-factly.

One of the men came forward. Modena didn’t flinch, didn’t move an inch, as a small sack was placed over his head.

‘Not yet anyway,’ the leader added. ‘You’re coming with us.’
5th October

Logan sprang upright in his bed. He was panting heavy breaths and his body was damp from sweat. He threw the covers off and shivered as the cold, conditioned air hit his skin, sending a wave of goose-pimples across his body. After a few moments, his breathing began to slow down as his mind recovered from the horrors of his sleep.

It had been the same dream as before. The nightmare that he had nearly every night. Except that it wasn’t really a dream at all. It was worse than that. It wasn’t a figment of his imagination, but a replay of the most heinous moments of his life.

He closed his eyes and felt the throbbing in his head. He was hungover. Usually alcohol would help him to have a dreamless night. But he only rarely allowed himself that luxury - that was the coward’s way out. And last night, even the alcohol hadn’t saved him from the nightmare.

Opening his eyes, he looked over at the empty space on the other side of the bed. He was alone. Was that a surprise? He had half expected it not to be empty.

He turned back to face the other way and winced in pain. It felt like he had daggers in his shoulder blades. That wasn’t from the drink.

With pained movement, he reached out and turned on the bedside lamp. A rush of memories from the night be-
fore flew through his head: beer, whisky, a girl. A bar brawl. Las Vegas, that’s where he was. The city of sin.

The flashes were enough to remind him why he was feeling so rough. It hadn’t just been the drink. He had taken a beating. There had been at least four of them and they had gone to town on him. An unseen attacker had taken him down from behind. A cheap shot. But he probably deserved it. In any case, Logan’s cuts and bruises would be gone in a few days. Their friend would have to get used to using only his left arm for the next few months.

Despite the beating, Logan had still ended up back in his hotel room. He didn’t know how. The last thing he could remember was lying on the floor in the bar as blow after blow came his way.

Logan got out of bed and headed toward the bathroom of his hotel suite to get some water. The inside of his mouth was so dry it felt like sandpaper. He poured himself a glass from the tap and downed it in two large gulps. The water barely touched the sides of his mouth, which didn’t seem to lose any of its dryness.

He closed his eyes again, but then immediately wished he hadn’t as the images from his sleep tore through him once more. The cold stone floor. The shouting all around him. The feeling of the blade against his flesh, cutting into him. The bloodied and lifeless body within touching distance, Logan powerless to help.

He opened his eyes, escaping the nightmare. His hands were shaking. He felt dizzy and had to grab hold of the sink with both hands to stop himself toppling over.

After a few deep breaths, the sickly sensation began to dissipate and he felt able to let go of the porcelain. He turned the cold tap to full force and used his swollen hands to splash water onto his face, feeling his mind awaken as he did so.

Snippets of memories from the night before continued to come back to him. A girl. What was her name? Caroline. That was it. A nice name. A nice girl. Shame about the guys she normally chose for company. After Logan and Caroline had spent a couple of hours talking, drinking, laughing to-
gether, some meathead had slapped her backside as she went to the toilet. Turned out he was a local, she was a local. Logan wasn’t. It was Logan’s British accent that had first drawn her interest. In the end it had probably only contributed to his downfall. He’d tried to be the knight in shining armour, out to save her. But his courageous efforts hadn’t turned out in his favour.

Maybe the night would have panned out differently if he’d kept his head and walked away. With her. But he hadn’t. The fight had found him, as it so often did. And he’d woken up alone. Again.

The sad thing was, he had enjoyed her company - she had made him feel alive for those few hours. Feel normal, even. Just two people sitting in a bar, having some drinks, talking. That was normal, wasn’t it? But in his clamour for that very feeling, he had blown it all to shit.

He knew that he was anything but normal. Normal people hadn’t lived half of their lives in a cocoon, isolated and separated from the real world. They had families and friends and they felt emotions like joy, happiness, pain, sorrow and fear. He’d spent his entire adult life bereft of those emotions. Ever since the agency had shown him how to control his feelings. No, not control his feelings - they’d trained him to ignore them altogether. They weren’t needed for what he was. For what he had become.

Until five months ago. When everything had changed.

Now he could feel emotions once again. But he was filled with so much angst, anger, regret, shame - so many feelings coming to the fore that he didn’t know how to control. And sometimes he wished he was still the zombie he had been for the last eighteen years - almost half of his life.

He drank another glass of water and looked at himself in the mirror. His six-foot-three frame meant he had to crouch slightly to get a good look at himself. Dried blood was caked on the side of his face. The wound that it had come from still glistened up in his hairline, discolouring the close-cut mousy-brown hair around it. His normally sparkling green eyes were bloodshot, his right eyelid swollen
almost completely shut. His bottom lip protruded awk-
wardly, making his face look lopsided. Not to mention the
three-day stubble and other obvious signs of wear and tear
from too much alcohol and too little sleep that aged a
normally handsome face.

He looked a mess. And not just because of last night’s
wounds. His life’s scars marked his entire torso, and were a
stark contrast to his normally clear and unblemished face.
The ones from five months ago were by far the most
severe.

How would a beautiful woman like Caroline react to
seeing those?

She had seemed pretty interested in him last night,
though. In their brief time together he’d found he could
talk to her like he could to very few people. She was a free
spirit, no inhibitions. She was young and naive about the
world, but she also had an unerring confidence to which
Logan had immediately been attracted. It’d been easy to
talk to her. Probably for the very reason that she didn’t
know anything about him.

She had liked him, he had liked her. Although she fit
the mould for so many of the women that Logan had seen
over the years, he felt there was something different about
her. All those others had come to nothing. After the initial
excitement had died down, there was really nothing of
substance in any of Logan’s previous relationships. But he
knew that was almost entirely because of him. He’d never
got to the point where he’d been able to let anyone into
his world. But maybe this time it was different. He wasn’t
the same person he used to be. He may have messed up
last night, but what did he have to lose in giving it another
go?

He made up his mind: he would definitely go and see
her tonight at the club she said she worked at. See if he
could be lucky for a change.

Logan’s mobile phone began to ring. Hesitantly he
walked out of the bathroom to the bedside table, unable to
avoid limping on his bruised legs. He picked up the phone.
It was Mackie, his boss. He felt himself lose two inches as his body deflated.

He knew what this meant. There would be no Caroline. Not this time.

‘You know I’m on holiday, don’t you?’ Logan said, answering the phone.

‘Logan, I’m afraid men like us don’t do holidays. We both know that. And anyway, I’d hardly call what you were doing last night a holiday.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘What do you think?’

It didn’t take him long to work it out. Logan felt his cheeks blush with embarrassment. Mackie had sent someone to keep an eye on him. Someone had been watching him last night. They had probably been watching him from the moment he landed here three days ago. Logan winced at the thought. Not just because Mackie had felt it necessary to do that, but because Logan hadn’t spotted the watcher at all.

He really was losing it.

‘And it’s just as well I had a man on you,’ Mackie said, breaking the silence. ‘What do you think would’ve happened if he hadn’t been there? You certainly wouldn’t have been waking up this morning to five-star luxury.’

So that explained how he had ended up back in his hotel room. Mackie’s man had brought him back here. Kept him out of trouble. Babysat him.

Logan felt his temperature rise as anger took hold.

‘Are you intentionally trying to ruin your career, Logan?’ Mackie was saying. ‘I’m not always going to be around to bail you out.’

Career? It was hardly what you would call a career. He was their machine. He did what they told him. He always had. And this just proved how they saw him.

‘I can’t believe you did that,’ Logan said. ‘So this is what it’s come to? Now I have to have my hand held wherever I go?’

‘Well, based on last night, quite clearly, yes.’
Logan thumped the wall in frustration. The skin on his knuckles split and his hand began to pound, but he was oblivious to the pain.

‘Logan, you’ve got to understand. You are what you are. We still need you. I still need you. But things aren’t like they used to be.’

‘I assume you’re not calling just to give me grief,’ Logan said, eager to change the subject before the conversation turned to things he didn’t want to think about.

‘I thought maybe it was time you came back. I have something for you.’

Logan’s head began to whir. It was like a ton weight had been lifted off his shoulders. On hearing Mackie say those words, five months of frustration and torment suddenly vanished. And yet he knew feeling like that was contradictory to everything he’d been fighting against for the last five months.

Was this really what he wanted? Was it what he needed to get his life back on track?

‘So what do you think? Are you ready?’

‘Yes. Of course I am,’ Logan said, without a moment’s hesitation.

He knew that it wasn’t true, however much he wanted it to be. But what else was he going to say? Maybe this would get him focused again. He would never be the same man that he used to be, and he didn’t want to be, but this was still what he was.

‘Good. I need you back here right away.’

‘So, what is it?’

‘Well, when I said you’re needed here, what I really meant was, you’re needed in Paris.’

‘Paris? What’s in Paris?’

‘Yesterday Frank Modena was.’

‘Frank Modena? Who’s that?’

‘Frank Modena is the Attorney General of our chums over the pond. Have you not been watching the news?’

‘Sorry, but I’ve not been keeping up to date with current affairs. It was you that sent me away on holiday, re-
member? Something about it aiding my recovery? And any-
way, Frank Modena being in Paris is of concern why?
‘I said he was in Paris. Past tense.’
‘Okay. So where is he now?’
‘That’s what I need you to find out.’
Chapter 4

6th October

Charles McCabe opened the walnut door to his riverfront office to see his assistant, Peter Winter, hovering over the large oak desk. It was almost nine in the morning and McCabe, or Mackie as he was known by all those close to him, was already in a bad mood from having to fight his way across central London on the underground. The weather was unseasonably warm and public transport hadn’t seemed to get the message. The underground had been like an oven with heaters on full blast and Mackie was a sweaty, wet mess by the time he arrived at his office.

‘What do you want?’ he snapped at Winter.

The young man looked up apologetically and started shuffling some papers on the desk.

‘Mackie, I mean, sir, good morning, sir.’

Mackie shut the door behind him, took off his coat and hung it on the coat stand. He carried on to his desk where he sat down on the large black leather chair. As ever he was well-groomed and smartly dressed, though his pin-stripe suit jacket only just buttoned up around his protruding belly. He had thick-rimmed glasses and dyed brown hair, neatly parted, which made his face look ten years younger than he really was.

‘Sir, did you get my message?’ Winter said, sounding flustered.
The blank look on Mackie’s face gave away the answer. ‘There’s a committee meeting in five minutes. To discuss the Modena situation.’
‘What?!’
‘I tried calling you, sir.’
It wasn’t the fact he hadn’t got the message that was the problem, it was more the unexpected timing of the call. Mackie was one of six commanders at the Joint Intelligence Agency, or JIA, a secretive intelligence organisation funded equally by the UK and US governments. The commanders were responsible for managing a group of intelligence agents and the JIA’s operations were overseen by a committee made up of a senior intelligence official and a politician from both the UK and US. A ten o’clock meeting was unusual, given that it would only be five a.m. in Washington. And the timing could only mean one thing: a problem.
‘Okay,’ Mackie said, fingering his goatee beard, a bad habit that he had been trying hard to rid himself of. ‘What do you know?’
Winter went on to give Mackie the little background he had. Although his title was that of personal assistant, Winter’s role was much more than that of a traditional secretary. He was essentially being primed to one day be a commander himself. He looked like a typical young executive with his neat suits, designer shoes and pristine appearance, but underneath there was substance to him as well. He was articulate and intelligent and also brilliantly manipulative when he needed to be. Mackie liked him a lot. Winter’s confidence and unerring enthusiasm reminded him of himself when he had been that age. Mackie, now in his fifties, had never been a field agent, but he’d worked so closely with them for over thirty years that he felt like he knew and understood their roles just as much as they did. No, in fact he understood their roles even more than they did, because he saw the bigger picture too.
Winter sat down on one of the two chairs at the front of the desk and Mackie dialled into the conference call. They were two minutes late and the last to join the call.
Mackie got the impression that the four committee members had already been deep in discussion.

Although he was answerable to the committee, he’d never had any qualms in rustling feathers or challenging them. As far as he was concerned, he knew more about the JIA than any of them - he’d been one of the original commanders when the agency was set up, long before any of the current committee members came on board. And so, after the usual pleasantries, Mackie dived in head first, as always.

‘Do we have a problem?’ he said.

There were murmurings on the phone before Jay Lindegaard, the current committee’s longest-serving member and a lifelong CIA bureaucrat, took the lead.

‘It’s not a problem, Charles,’ Lindegaard said in his thick Deep South drawl. ‘We just need to understand how you’re handling the Modena case. I’m sure you can imagine this is being taken very seriously here.’

‘Of course I know that,’ Mackie snapped. ‘It’s been taken care of. That’s all you need to know.’

‘And who is your lead agent on this?’

Mackie was fully aware that everyone on the call knew the answer to that. It was surely the entire purpose of the call after all.

‘It’s Carl Logan,’ Mackie said.

‘That’s what we heard. I have to say, we’re a little uncomfortable about this.’

‘He’s my agent. Let me handle it.’

‘You know we can’t afford for this to go wrong,’ piped up John Sanderson from SIS, or MI6 as it was still routinely referred to by all and sundry. Sanderson was the only committee member that Mackie really had any time for, even if he was becoming soft and disinterested as he neared retirement.

‘Exactly,’ said Lindegaard. ‘Just look at everything in the press recently and all these ridiculous leaks - the intelligence community is already under attack. The last thing we need is an unhinged and incompetent agent on the
loose in such a high-profile case. What happens if our whole operation is blown wide open?’

‘He’s the most experienced man I’ve got,’ Mackie said.

‘He’s been out of action for five months,’ replied Lindegaard. ‘And from everything I’ve heard, he’s a mess. I’ve seen many agents removed altogether for far less significant problems.’

‘I know what I’m doing here,’ Mackie declared, not wanting to argue the points. The truth was that even he was doubtful of Logan’s state of mind. How could he not be? But he had to trust Logan – trust in the ability that Mackie knew he had. Logan deserved the chance. It wasn’t like his problems had been of his own making. And even if it came back to bite him, Mackie owed it to Logan. Mackie had given Logan this life. And it was his actions that had led to Logan’s fateful assignment ending the way it had.

‘You realise if you’re wrong about this, it’s not just his neck on the line,’ Lindegaard said.

‘I know. He’s ready. There’s nothing more to say.’

There was quiet on the line for a good ten seconds. As ever, the two politicians on the committee, Philip Greenwood and Randall Curtis, had been silent throughout. Although Mackie understood the necessity to have some link to the powers that be both within the US and the UK, their presence on the committee was merely a token gesture to ensure they were informed of activities, rather than their having any meaningful involvement in matters in which they had no expertise.

‘Okay,’ Sanderson said. ‘We’re bowing to your judgement. For now. He’s got one week. And we expect daily updates on his movements and his progress. If there’s anything amiss, he gets pulled. Permanently.’

‘He’s my agent, not yours,’ Mackie said through gritted teeth. ‘I decide when he gets pulled.’

Mackie pressed the mute button and swore at the phone. Winter was unable to hide his smile.

‘We’re already giving you the benefit here, Charles,’ said Lindegaard. ‘Please don’t make out that we’re the bad guys.’
'Just let him get on with it,' Mackie said, after unmuting the phone. ‘Winter will keep you abreast.’

Mackie ended the call without another word and let out another tirade of abuse at the machine. He stood up, adjusting the waistband of his trousers to cover his stomach as he strode over to the window of his office.

‘Please tell me Logan has sobered up enough to have left Vegas by now?’ he said to Winter.

‘Yes, sir,’ Winter said. ‘In fact, he boarded a flight from Newark last night. He’ll be landing in Paris shortly.’

Mackie was pleasantly surprised to hear that. He’d half expected Logan to still be in a drunken stupor in some rundown casino. But, unusually, Mackie also felt incredibly nervous. It was only natural that the more pressure the committee put on him over Logan, the more he began to doubt his own judgement. Was Logan really ready for this? He didn’t know, but he would find out soon enough.

‘Okay. I should get moving,’ Mackie said. ‘I need to get to Paris. Now.’
Chapter 5

Five months of physical recovery, recuperation and rehabilitation. Even without considering the recent spate of bar fights, it had been the most gruelling five months of Logan’s life. And the mental rehabilitation, which he knew deep down was nowhere near complete, had been more like torture.

During those months he’d endlessly questioned where his life was heading, unsure whether he really cared about living at all. But now he was back. The call had come and he had obliged. He wouldn’t go so far as to say it felt good to be back. But it certainly felt familiar. And it felt like it was what he needed. Whatever this case was about, he had a point to prove. He might not be a machine anymore, but he could still do this. He had to still be able to do this. When it came down to it, being an agent was all he had in the world.

So why was he feeling like it was a step too far, too soon?

‘Good morning, sir,’ Logan said to Mackie as he walked into the makeshift office, trying his best to act as if this was nothing more than a routine work day. ‘I would say it’s good to see you but I don’t like lying to people.’

‘Could have fooled me,’ Mackie retorted, not looking up from the desk at which he was sitting. ‘Half your job is about lying to people.’
The modern desk looked out of place in what was actually the lounge of a rundown Parisian apartment. Logan hadn’t been here before, but it was much the same as any other safe house he had ever been in.

It was located in Saint-Denis, a largely industrial suburb. Many parts of the area were surprisingly deprived given the close proximity to some of Paris’s central tourist traps. There was the odd exception, such as the Basilica Cathedral of Saint Denis, with its rich history dating back to Roman times when it was a cemetery - the archaeological remains of which still lie beneath the cathedral. By and large, though, it was far from the romance and historic architecture that Paris was so famous for. But that was the same for any city. The real city, the bowels where the thousands and millions of people lived, was never what you saw on the picture postcard. And yet it was those areas that made the cities.

The safe house was in an area made up of narrow streets of nondescript, post-war housing. Together with the littered streets, graffiti on the walls and un-weeded yards, it was clear that this was one of the less prosperous parts. From the outside it was an unassuming apartment block, and on the inside it was much the same. There was no high-tech security here - just an agent in an unmarked car across the street and another stationed in the hallway of the apartment. They didn’t need anything more than that. Why bother drawing attention to the place?

Logan hadn’t recognised the man in the hallway as he came in, but then that wasn’t unusual. The fewer people you knew - and, more importantly, the fewer people that knew you - the longer you’d be in this game.

Logan shut the door behind him then headed over toward the desk.

‘Logan, you look terrible,’ Mackie said, finally looking up from the pile of papers he had been reading. It wasn’t just his normal banter either. He looked genuinely concerned by Logan’s dishevelled appearance.

‘Thanks. That’s quite a welcome,’ Logan said, well aware that Mackie was right.
Logan had headed straight to McCarran Airport after speaking to his boss the previous day. Unable to get a direct flight into France, he’d stopped off at Newark. From there he’d taken the redeye to Paris. He had only managed to get a couple of hours’ sleep on the flight, and although some of the swelling on his face had gone down, it was still heavily bruised. To add to that, he had heavy bags under his eyes and the three-day stubble he’d had in Vegas was now almost beyond being stubble.

He was used to travelling at short notice; it was part and parcel of the job. But when you put into the mix the two days of boozing, the fight and the lack of sleep, it was all the more gruelling. Logan felt as rough as he looked.

“What happened to you?” Mackie asked.

“Don’t ask,” Logan said, shaking his head and sitting down on the simple metal chair opposite Mackie.

“Don’t fob me off. This isn’t good, Logan. I thought you were over there getting yourself straightened out?”

“I was. I am.”

“Not in the way I meant,” Mackie said, the anger in his voice rising. “You’re treading a fine line. We can’t have your antics drawing unwanted attention. You know how bad that could be. For you.”

Logan got it. But what could he say? He was a mess and everyone at the JIA knew it. His current appearance, bruises and all, only confirmed what everyone else was already thinking.

“I’m surprised they’ve let me come back,” Logan said, referring to the committee members, who he was sure would have raised their eyebrows at Mackie’s decision to put him on the case.

“It was my decision, nobody else’s. So tell me what happened.”

“Didn’t my babysitter fill you in?” Logan said.

“Don’t play games with me, Logan. I want to hear it from you. Just what is going on with you?”

“There’s nothing going on,” Logan said, trying to keep his cool. “I’m fine. It was just a scrape. These things happen.”
Mackie laughed sarcastically. ‘You’re right there. These things always happen to you.’

‘Is this all you brought me here to talk about?’ Logan said, standing up and taking a step toward the door. ‘If it is then I can think of better things to do.’

‘Sit down!’ Mackie bellowed, getting to his feet. Logan stopped in his tracks. Mackie was a good six inches shorter than Logan but he had a certain presence that made people stop and pay attention. ‘I haven’t brought you back here to play games. This is serious business, Logan. And if you think I’m giving you a hard time then it’s because I have to know that you can handle this.’

Sheepishly, Logan did as he was told and sat down again. He couldn’t let this opportunity pass him by. Whether he was ready or not wasn’t the question, as far as he was concerned.

‘No offence,’ Mackie said, sitting back down, his voice calm again, ‘but couldn’t you have shaved at least?’

Logan sensed that this time Mackie’s comment had been more upbeat, trying to lighten the mood between them. That was his style - though Logan knew Mackie would never let anyone win an argument, or even worm their way out of one.

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ Logan said. ‘I didn’t realise I worked for an employer that disallowed facial hair. And you might not have heard, but they don’t give out inflight razor blades these days.’

‘Look, I mean ... your clothes ... what’s up with your clothes?’ Mackie said, just the slightest smile now visible.

Logan was wearing a pair of jeans which were threadbare on the knees and backside, an old pair of white trainers which had taken on a brown tinge many months ago, and a black turtleneck sweater.

‘I’ve been on holiday. It might surprise you but I didn’t take any suits with me. And anyway, this jumper is brand new. I just bought it in Newark airport ’cause I knew you’d do this. It was either this or my orange Hawaiian t-shirt.’

Mackie smiled and laughed, easing the tension in the room for the first time. ‘I guess you did me a favour there.’
Despite his mood, Logan couldn’t help but smile as well. Mackie had made his point. Logan had understood it.

‘So where’s Winter?’ Logan asked, though he was glad he wasn’t here. Logan couldn’t stand him. The guy was ten years younger than Logan but already thought he ran the place.

‘He’s still in London. Why?’

‘Just curious. Are you going to tell me what we’re doing here?’ Logan asked. ‘Why do we care about some politician?’

‘He’s not technically a politician. He’s a lawyer.’

‘That’s just about as bad.’

‘Well, he’s a pretty important lawyer. And very influential. Now, this case has come to us from the very top.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘I do say. The Attorney General is the US’s most senior law enforcement officer. He’s also very close to the president. He’s been kidnapped, and that causes a major headache. Not just because of what he knows, but because of who he knows.’

‘So who is doing the official investigation then?’ Logan said, referring to the fact that the JIA’s involvement would be known to no-one in the outside world.

It was quite simple, really: the US and UK governments used the JIA to carry out black-ops and covert operations under the radar. Plausible deniability. But that didn’t mean it was some sinister organisation charged with carrying out questionable dirty work that would have conspiracy theorists drooling. Just an organisation that was far enough removed to give its agents the room they needed to carry out operations as they saw fit. Or at least, as their governments saw fit.

Logan was a field agent, one of the most experienced that the JIA had. He guessed his role fell somewhere in between that of your classic spy and a private investigator. His skill was in doing whatever it took to get a job done, whatever the job may be.

‘The Police nationale will be performing the official investigation,’ Mackie said, ‘but it wouldn’t surprise me if
the FBI and CIA didn’t try to wangle their way into this one somehow, given who the victim is. Probably the FBI on the official side. Now, you’re reporting directly to me, so keep well away from anyone else on this one unless I tell you otherwise.’

‘I know that,’ Logan said. He didn’t need to be taught to suck eggs. The JIA rarely had any legal jurisdiction for their operations, so they generally steered well clear of any team carrying out a parallel local investigation. ‘So what do you know?’

Mackie pointed at the two boxes next to his desk, which Logan could see were crammed with loose papers and file.

‘This is what we know,’ Mackie said, standing up and walking toward the coat stand near the door. ‘Looks like you’ve got some reading to do. You’ve got three hours.’

Without looking at Logan, Mackie pulled his coat from the stand and walked out of the door.
Frank Modena opened his eyes. His vision was blurred from the last beating he’d taken. His left eye was virtually closed up. It made it even harder to see in the windowless room, which was only sparsely lit by a single overhead bulb. Modena couldn’t see behind him, but the room in front of him was completely empty. The poured concrete floor had pockmarks and chips taken out of it, suggesting the room had seen heavy use at some point. On the exposed brick walls were large patches of mould and mildew which, in the dim light, seemed to take on a sinister appearance, and there was an odour of damp and decay in the room.

Modena’s hands were tied behind him, fixed to the chair that he was sitting on, and each of his ankles was tied to a chair leg. He couldn’t move. Though it didn’t really matter, because he didn’t have the strength to try.

He’d been tied to the chair since he arrived at this place. They hadn’t yet fed him, or moved him at all. He had lost his one last dignity a number of hours ago when he had been unable to hold his bladder any longer, much to the amusement of one of his captors.

When they had put the sack over his head and thrown him into the vehicle, Modena had used the movements to try to keep track of where they were going, seeking some comfort in at least knowing in which direction they had headed. But it was harder than it seemed. Within minutes,
he no longer had any idea of direction. At a guess, he thought they’d driven for close to two hours before they’d finally come to a stop and dragged him into this hellhole. He had been taken down some steps, so he assumed he was in the basement of a building, but he had no idea what kind of building it might be. It could have been a barn or a city-centre skyscraper for all he knew. But there was so little noise, so little indication of the outside world, that he had no way of determining which it was. After arriving here it had been several more hours before the captors had taken the sack off Modena’s head. And then the beatings had started.

None of them had yet shown their faces, always wearing their balaclavas. And they hadn’t used any names for each other. He’d seen four attackers when they’d taken him, but he guessed there must have been at least two others involved: one driving the ambulance and another to drive the panel van that he’d been hauled into. But since he’d been in this room, only three different people had been in. Even though he hadn’t seen any faces, he’d used their sizes and shapes as a guide. Though given their identical clothing, he supposed there could have been more than three if two or more of them were of a similar build.

One of them definitely seemed to be the leader, or at least was the most senior of those who had been in the room with him. The same one who had spoken to him before they had taken him. It was quite easy to tell him apart from the others. He was big in all directions, like a heavyweight boxer or a wrestler, and he had a deep, bass voice. A real thug.

Modena was straining to see through his swollen eyes. But with the sparse light he could tell he was alone in the room. For now.

Minutes later, though, the door opened and in walked a figure carrying a small object up to his chest. Modena winced, initially mistaking the object for a gun, but as the figure came closer he realised it was a plate. In the other hand was a glass of what looked like water. This man
wasn’t the leader. He was too short. Too thin. Modena felt the slightest twinge of relief.

‘It’s time for you to eat,’ the man said. He spoke in English, though it was heavily accented. Modena would have guessed he was Arab, Middle Eastern, but he really couldn’t be sure. It was the first time he’d heard this voice, but he thought he recognised the shape of the man. So that would still make it only three who had been into this room with him.

‘Please. Why are you doing this?’ Modena asked, though he wasn’t really sure that he expected an answer.

The man put down the plate and held out the glass of water to Modena’s lips. He began to tip it up, most of the water splashing down Modena’s front as he frantically lapped at the cool liquid. When the glass was empty the man put it down and picked up the plate.

‘You need to eat,’ the man said.

He thrust a spoon toward Modena, who initially resisted, but then parted his lips and let the spoon be pushed into his mouth.

‘There you go. Not so bad, is it? Ha! I could be feeding you your own shit and you probably wouldn’t care right now.’

Modena had no idea what the food was. It didn’t seem to taste of anything at all and he swallowed it without chewing. He stared into the man’s dark eyes as he ate, not sure what he was hoping to see. He saw nothing.

After six mouthfuls he began to feel his stomach heaving. He closed his lips tightly when the spoon came back toward him.

‘Last chance,’ the man said. ‘You don’t want any more then I’m out of here. Your next visitor might not be so friendly, though. You ask me, I’m better company than some of those guys.’

He wasn’t wrong there. He was the only one of the three so far to have not used Modena as a human punch-bag. Modena opened his mouth and took one more spoonful. He dry-heaved as soon as he swallowed the food, struggling to keep it down.
‘Whoa there,’ the man said, laughing. ‘Looks like you’ve had enough then. Don’t want to make a mess of that nice suit you’re wearing.’

‘Why are you doing this?’ Modena asked, trying to keep his mind off the pain in his body from the beatings and the sickness in his stomach from the food.

‘Not for me to say. Just do as you’re told and you’ll get out of this. If you don’t then things are going to get a whole lot worse for you. You know that, don’t you?’

‘I just want to go home.’

‘You want to go home?’ exclaimed a booming voice, followed by fake laughter.

Modena hadn’t heard him come into the room. It was the leader: the foghorn voice and his size were unmistakable.

‘You’ll go home when we get what we want from you,’ he said.

‘Just do what he says. You’ll get out of here if you do,’ the thin man said to Modena, almost in a whisper, before he got up and made for the door.

Modena was actually sad to see him go. He had been the only one to show any form of kindness. All the others had done so far was cause him pain.

The foghorn man strode up and laid a fist into Modena’s stomach. He bowed his head and exhaled deeply. He knew the guy hadn’t put his all into it, but the blow was still enough to send Modena’s head into a spin. The food sloshed in his stomach, pushing up his gullet toward his mouth. He managed to hold it down – just.

‘You do what we ask and you’ll be going home,’ the man said. ‘You don’t, and ... well, you know the rest.’

A punch was thrown into Modena’s chest. The pressure sent his heart into a panic. It felt like it was about to explode.

All they had done so far was beat him and say the same thing to him: ‘Do what we ask and you’ll go home.’ The only problem was, they hadn’t yet asked him anything.
‘I’ll do whatever you want,’ Modena said through jolted breaths. ‘I have money. Is that what this is about? I have lots of money. I’ll do whatever you want.’

The man leaned down to Modena and whispered into his ear. He was so close that Modena could feel the warmth of his foul coffee breath against his cheek. Modena struggled not to gag at the smell.

His swollen eyes opened as wide as they would go as he listened to what the man had to say. Listened to what it was that they had kidnapped him for.

‘That’s what you want?’ Modena said.

The big man stood up again, a wicked smile visible beneath the black balaclava. ‘That’s what we want. You give us that and you’re on your way home to wifey.’

Modena shook his head and opened and closed his mouth a few times before the words finally came out. ‘That’s what this is all about!’ he hissed. Anger rose up inside him and a strength returned to him from somewhere within.

But as quickly as the feeling had come, it was taken away from him again when a right hook from the big man landed on his head. It caught Modena on the ear and sent a ringing noise coursing through his brain. It took him a moment to recover, but before he could say anything another fist was thrust into his stomach. This time, despite his efforts, he couldn’t stop as he retched and sprayed sticky, acidic vomit over his legs and onto the floor.

‘Fuck me!’ the man said, laughing. ‘That’s grim!’

Modena heaved a few more times, until there wasn’t anything else in him to come out.

‘Look, it’s pretty simple, Frank. That one thing will save your life. In fact, that’s the only thing that’s going to.’

Modena spat out a mouthful of phlegm. It didn’t take away any of the foul taste. ‘But … you don’t understand. I can’t do what you’re asking. I can’t. Because I don’t know it … I don’t know how!’

‘Oh, you will do it,’ the man snarled, an instant before his fist caught Modena on the side of his head again. ‘Or you’d better start praying.’
His head filled with pain and confusion, Modena was only partially aware of another strike to his head before everything went black.

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CHAPTER 1

She wiped clean the bloodied knife, sheathed it, then looked down at the two lifeless bodies. The man lay naked on the bed, his face twisted into an ugly grimace. Thick red blood smeared his flabby body; most of the blood his, some of it his wife’s. Her lithe body lay haphazardly on the floor by her husband’s feet. Her throat was open, the wound deep enough that the white of her spine was visible.

If only she’d stayed in the bathroom a few moments longer...

The man had been the target. It had taken just two days to track him down to the remote coastal house. One day later and he would have been smuggled safely out of the country.

Unfortunately for him, the assassin’s hunting skills had been underestimated.

Killing the wife had been nothing more than a split-second reaction. It hadn’t been the intention. If she’d simply been sleeping by her husband’s side she may well have lived through the ordeal.

The killer wouldn’t dwell. She spent a few moments satisfying herself that despite the impromptu second kill, the scene remained clean of her. Then she
slipped out of the house, the many bodyguards sta-
tioned there to protect the dead man never once sus-
pecting her presence.

She headed the half mile along the coastal road on
foot to where she’d earlier parked her car. A chilling
wind blasted off the nearby shore. It was dark outside,
the time nearly two a.m. The closest town was over
five miles away and there were no streetlights here.
With the sky overcast, the road was near black.

At least it was for the first five minutes of her
walk. Then, out of the darkness, came the twin beams
of a car’s headlights, reaching out from behind the
killer and slicing through the air ahead. She turned.
The vehicle was only fifty yards away. She didn’t panic,
just kept on walking.

As the car neared, she held her breath. Her hand
grasped the handle of her sheathed knife. The growl of
the car’s guzzling engine reverberated around her
head, vibrations shooting through her as the vehicle
crawled past. It came to a stop ten yards ahead.

The driver’s door opened. For a brief moment, the
car’s dim interior light lit up the face of the man who
stepped out.

She should have known it would be him.

He stood still, facing her. Now he was upright,
away from the thin light seeping out of the car’s win-
dows, she could no longer make out his face.

‘Why?’ was all he said as he stood by the open
doors.

His hands hung casually by his sides. Was he armed?
‘You know why,’ she said.
‘I can still protect you.’
‘I never asked for protection.’
‘No. You didn’t. But you’re going to need it now.’
She let his words sink in for only a second.
And then she ran.
She sprinted through the blackness, arms and legs
pumping in a steady rhythm, her breaths deep and fast.
Her heart soon pounded from adrenaline and exertion.
The darkness would help her, she knew, making her nearly invisible as soon as she was away from the faint glow of the car’s rear lights. Still, she was surprised he didn’t open fire on her. Perhaps he wasn’t armed after all.

She heard nothing of him from behind and didn’t once dare to look. Straining every sinew and muscle, she bounded across the soggy ground, headed directly for the steep cliffs that gave way to the thrashing sea below.

With each step she took, the roar of the crashing waves grew louder. Soon it filled her ears. On the distant horizon, the clouds began to part. A sliver of bright white light from the moon became visible. For the first time, she could see the endless expanse of inky water below. And the edge of the cliff just a few paces ahead.

She closed her eyes, preparing for the leap into the unknown...

The next second, she was shoved from behind. She lost her footing and ended up face down in the mud. Maybe he slipped too. Or maybe he’d simply thrown his whole body at her in order to bring her down. Either way, his big frame thudded onto the ground next to her.

In an instant, she turned onto her back, moving away from him, then leaped onto her feet. He did the same. She pulled out the long knife and swung it in a narrow arc as he raced toward her. She caught his arm and heard the slicing noise as the blade tore through skin and flesh.

He didn’t cry out. Didn’t even murmur.

He smashed into her. The knife flew from her grasp and they tumbled back to the ground, him on top, straddling her, pinning her arms with his knees.

Within seconds, two thick hands were wrapped around her neck, choking her. She rasped and gasped for breath.
The open wound on his forearm glistened in the moonlight. She reached out as much as his restrictive hold would allow, and dug her nails in. Dug deep. She squeezed as hard as she could.

Not so much as a flinch from him. It was like he wasn’t even there. No humanity behind those pearly eyes. Just a... machine.

His strength, his determination, his focus, was too much. Her eyes began to bulge. The shadowy vision of him on top blurred.

But then she saw it. A faint sparkle in the darkness. Metallic. Not her knife. A gun. On the wet ground next to them.

He was armed after all. At least he had been.

She stretched out her hand, the pressure from his knees on her upper arms giving her little room to manoeuvre. She clawed at the soggy mud. Her fingertips were just an inch from the weapon. Her whole body strained...

She got it.

Grabbing the gun’s barrel, she swung the grip toward his head. He never saw it coming. The thick metal handle crashed into his skull. He barely seemed to notice. She hit him again. Then a third time. Finally, the grip round her neck weakened. Slightly.

It was all she needed.

She bucked and pushed up with all the strength she could muster. His body gave a couple of inches. Enough for leverage. She swivelled and took him with her. A moment later, she was the one on top, the gun’s barrel pressing against his forehead.

In the darkness, all she could clearly make out of him were his sparkling eyes. When she’d first met him she’d thought him handsome. Out in the cold, dark night, his penetrating gaze was sinister and unforgiving.

She stared down and he stared right back.

‘If you were going to shoot me, you’d have done it already,’ he said, still eerily calm and composed. A
stark contrast to how she was feeling. ‘Do it. Do it now. You won’t get a better chance.’

Her finger was on the trigger. In fact, despite her hesitation, she was actually pushing down on the trigger as he made his move. He grabbed her wrist and pushed the gun up. She fired. Three times. The bullets sailed away into the night. The noise of the gun so close to her head was deafening. And disorientating.

The next she knew, he’d taken back the gun and was turning it round on her.

She was sure there would be no hesitation from him.

She was on her feet and hurtling to the cliff edge when he opened fire. A bullet caught her in the ankle. Then another in her side. As she leaped over the edge, a third bullet sunk into her shoulder.

She plummeted into the darkness below.
CHAPTER 2

Present day

‘Mrs Walker,’ the lady receptionist stated in her thick Spanish accent. She looked up over her computer screen into the waiting area where a handful of young women were sitting expectantly.

Kim got to her feet. She was alone. All the other women had husbands, boyfriends, or what looked to be their mothers, waiting with them. Kim didn’t have a mother. Not one she’d known anyway. And her husband, Patrick, was as ever too busy to come with her.

That was fine. She could handle herself. She always had.

On the outside, Kim Walker was beautiful, radiant, confident and alluring. The type of person who made others feel happier. But then the world only ever sees what it wants to see. What lies underneath? Nobody ever really knows. Kim had always been an expert at masking her true self. That was the way it had to be.

The truth was she was wracked with nerves. As confident as she appeared, she always felt tense in the presence of someone of authority. They were just doctors and nurses here. They weren’t the police, the intelligence services or part of some secret and deadly government-sponsored murder squad. They weren’t going to ask questions she couldn’t or wouldn’t answer.
They posed no real danger.

To them, Kim Walker was just another pregnancy, another statistic, and another set of forms to fill out. Albeit at thirty-six, she was certainly the oldest of the expectant mothers in the room.

Kim approached the receptionist, who indicated over to room number four. Kim headed to the door, opened it to reveal a darkened room, and spotted the young female doctor sitting in front of a bank of brightly lit monitors. The doctor looked up at Kim, an apology on her face.

‘Mrs Walker, I’m Dr. Karmala. Please come, sit down.’

The doctor, as with all the other staff at the expensive private clinic in Marbella, spoke perfect English. Many of them were English, though the doctor’s features and her accent suggested she was from somewhere on the Indian sub-continent.

‘You can call me Kim. No need to be so formal.’

‘Certainly, Kim.’

Kim shut the door and headed to the bed and sat, looking over the machines next to her with their myriad of knobs, dials, and lights. She felt a sickly sensation in the pit of her stomach. ‘You have the results?’

The doctor hesitated, shifting in her seat, then looked down at the papers in front of her.

‘Yes.’ She paused, as if gathering her thoughts. Or trying to find the words. ‘Mrs Walker-’

‘Kim.’

‘I’m sorry, Kim. As you know your pregnancy is considered more high risk because of your, urm, age-’

‘Just tell me. Please,’ Kim said, already preparing for the worst.

Tears rolled down Kim’s face as she drove away from the clinic, back towards her lavish villa high up in the mountains overlooking the cool blue Mediterranean. She made no attempt to wipe at the salty streaks.
Perhaps this was nature’s way of punishing her for what she was. She didn’t believe in a god, about praying for a better life or for forgiveness for the bad things she’d done. Good and evil weren’t concepts designed to test one’s faith in a higher being, they were simply human nature.

Yet throughout her life, Kim had seen an element of karma; that she did firmly believe in. What goes around comes around. Or maybe it was just pure shitty luck.

Either way, deep down, Kim felt she deserved it. But how the hell was she going to break the news to Patrick?

They’d been together for over five years, married for four. He’d long wanted children. She’d always been more hesitant. Because of her own painful childhood, she was fearful of the world she would be bringing a child into. What if it suffered as she had? Even worse, what if it turned out to be just like her?

But slowly, as the years wore on, her natural mothering instincts had won out. Patrick had never pressured her. She’d loved him even more for that. Of course, like everyone else, they’d had difficulties in their relationship, but the lack of children had never driven a wedge between them.

Patrick would be as devastated as she was about the news. And it wasn’t like she was getting any younger. Even if she could get pregnant again in the future, the risks would only increase further with each attempt they made.

Kim let out a long, pained shout. Not a scream, but an angry, fearsome roar. She was angry with herself more than anything. How fucking selfish could you get? There she was, full of devastation and self-pity that the child she was carrying was less than perfect, but it was still a living child. It was still her child. She would love it unconditionally.
The tears stopped. A hard-edged resolve broke onto Kim’s face as she battled against the turmoil in her mind.

It was five p.m. when she wound the car along the long driveway and rolled to a stop outside the grand double doors of her home. Patrick’s car, his beloved Maserati, wasn’t there. She had no idea what time he’d be back from work. She’d left a voicemail asking him to call. She hadn’t given the details but had hoped from her tone of voice - and given he knew where she was going that afternoon - that he’d have understood what the problem might be.

She’d had nothing in response from him. She loved him dearly but he really could be a self-centred prick sometimes. A lot of the time actually.

Kim stepped out of her car and walked to the entrance, first unlocking the metal security grate and then the left of the double doors. She swung the door open and stepped into the marble-floored atrium, feeling a waft of pleasantly cool air on her face. She let out a long sigh, pleased to be back in her own space where she could shut herself off from the outside world once more.

She turned to push the door closed. Caught sight of the dark figure, off to her right, a split second too late.

Her old instincts were still there, but they weren’t as sharp as they used to be. And she was pre-occupied. Maybe if it had been any other day, maybe if the news she’d just received had been positive, she’d have been more alert and it would have made the difference. A fraction of a second extra was probably all she needed to turn the tables on her would-be attacker.

And yet it was by such small margins that people regularly lived and died in all sorts of circumstances; accidents, close shaves.

But this was no accident, Kim knew. Far from it. And she realised as soon as the almond-scented rag was forced over her face that there was nothing she could do.
Seconds later, her body went limp. And during the grave violence that soon followed, her unconsciousness was one thing Kim Walker would surely have been thankful for.
James Ryker thanked the shop assistant and picked up the bag of groceries. He’d been going to the same store every other day for nearly twelve months but the assistant - always the same young man, barely out of his teens with an acne-scarred face - never once acknowledged Ryker for the local he was trying to be. Even in this far-flung place, thousands of miles of land and ocean between him and his old life, and where he’d never once caused any trouble, there was still something about Ryker that led others to be wary. At six feet three and with a beefy frame, he could to some extent understand why.

Or perhaps it was all in his mind.

Ryker headed on foot back toward his home, his senses high - as always. He doubted he would ever allow himself to feel truly safe. The one time he dropped his guard would be the one time he was caught out.

As he strode along the road, Ryker’s slate-green eyes swept from left to right and back again, taking in everything and everybody around him. There was no pavement, not in this town, just a single strip of tarmac that ran through the main street, filled with mopeds, cars and pedestrians alike.

The tarmac was a recent addition. It was only present for a couple of miles either side of the town. Beyond that was a simple dirt track that snaked around
the coastline and surrounding farmers’ fields. The track was dry most months of the year and would send up plumes of blood-red dust every time a vehicle passed.

The place Ryker now called home was certainly remote, but it wasn’t cut off. The area had running water, gas, and electricity, even a sporadic mobile phone signal. It was about as isolated as Ryker could bare - heading off into the wilds to live a life of solitude would probably drive him insane.

As he walked along the dirt, an open-topped four-by-four slowed as it passed. Ryker instinctively tensed, priming himself for action, even though his immediate thought was that the driver was about to stop to offer a lift. It had happened before. As a general rule of thumb, he’d found the locals to be extremely kind to each other, and on occasion to him and Lisa, the outsiders. He’d never once accepted such an offer of help.

A second later, the four-by-four sped up again and headed off into the distance, a dust cloud billowing out from its rear. Ryker held his breath until the dirt had settled. Perhaps the kindly offer had been hastily withdrawn when the driver spotted who the pedestrian was. That was fine. Ryker was well prepared to give a please and thank you when required but was otherwise happy to be left alone.

A few minutes later, Ryker’s house came into view in the near distance - a simple and secluded beachfront property made of timber and glass. To some it would be a ramshackle hut, but to others, a bohemian rustic retreat.

Set atop a small rocky outcrop, a good two acres of land came with the house. Not that Ryker had any intention of turning it into a real garden of any sort. The beach was right there, a short clamber down the rocks, should he ever need outside space. Instead he left the land to grow freely, providing an extra element of seclusion for the property.

It was tranquil, not extravagant. The house wasn’t a billionaire’s exotic escape but suited its purpose and
was in an enviable location overlooking clear waters. Considering where Ryker had come from, the depths he’d plunged to in his previous life, what more could he ask for?

The problem, he knew, was that no matter what mask he put on for the world, no matter how hard he tried to fit in, he could never truly let go of his past - of who he really was. He and Lisa were determined to fashion a life for themselves, but Ryker simply couldn’t ignore the sense of suspense he felt. Not fear exactly, but not far from it. It dominated his mind, nearly every waking minute. Wondering not if they would come for him, but when. No matter how far he ran, no matter what he did to hide, that would be the case for as long as he was still alive.

But whoever came for him, whatever they threw at him, Ryker would take them on.

He would fight. He would survive.

After all, it was what he had always done best.

Some would call it paranoia. But Ryker wasn’t paranoid. He was a realist. And as his gaze passed from the unkempt grounds and up the road, he felt a sudden jolt of vindication.

The twisting road in front of him weaved off towards a metal bridge, about a hundred yards long, spanning the mouth of a small river. On the far side of the bridge, Ryker spotted the same four-by-four that had passed him minutes earlier. It was facing him. Although he couldn’t make out anything of the vehicles occupants, he could tell from the wispy smoke trailing up from the back end that its engine was idling.

At that moment, Ryker was sure of one thing: Someone had found him.
CHAPTER 4

Exactly who they were, Ryker didn’t know. Really it didn’t matter. No one but he and Lisa knew of their new identities and their location. If someone - anyone - had found them, it was a problem.

A man like Ryker, who had lived in the shadows for so much of his life, always on the move, always looking over his shoulder, had become well used to forever analysing his environment for potential threats. It had formed such an integral part of his training all those years earlier - not to mention the many years subsequent - that it had become second nature. And that was why he didn’t panic now. He simply put into motion a well-laid plan.

Keeping his eyes on the four-by-four in the distance, Ryker picked up his pace as he headed to his home. His brain was whirring. His first aim was clear: get to the house and find out whether Lisa was there. He had to make sure she was okay.

When he reached the front door, Ryker carried on going, snaking around to the back. Regardless of whether or not a threat was already on the inside, he wasn’t going in the front.

He came up against a small frosted window on the side of the house. The window was locked shut, as it had been when Ryker had left earlier. Beyond the window lay the en-suite shower room to the house’s only
bedroom. In a small hideaway beneath the panel on
the base of the shower tray lay a fully loaded FN Five-
seven handgun containing twenty armour-piercing
5.7mm cartridges.

Ryker certainly wasn’t ill prepared. He’d primed
several entrance and exit routes to the house should he
ever need to move with stealth. Although the bathroom
window was locked, he’d fitted it himself to allow the
simple yet secure structure to be prised open - should
you know how.

Ryker checked around him and found the small slat
of wood that he’d hidden beneath foliage. He used the
slat to edge the corner of the window open at its
weakest spot, then tugged sharply to snap the thin
clasps which sat along the inner edges of the frame.
The window opened two inches, enough to allow Ryker
to release the handle. He pulled the window further
open then slunk through the small space, slithering
silently like a snake passing over rocks.

He crept forward to the shower, removed the
weapon, and gave it a once-over. No problems. Moving
with caution, he headed to the partially open door.

Ryker stole a glance before moving out into the
bedroom, creeping in silence. His breathing was deep
and calm, not even a murmur escaping his lips as he
slowly inhaled and exhaled.

When he reached the bedroom doorway, he stood
and waited. Listened. Nothing. No sound of movement
from within his home. No sounds at all. He cautiously
peered out over the open-plan space in front of him,
index finger on the gun’s trigger.

Ryker spotted the solitary figure, casually sitting in
an armchair. And he relaxed. A little.

Gun still held out, but the feeling of threat some-
what diminished, Ryker moved out from behind the
deroor and toward the man. ‘You,’ he said.

The man looked up. Certainly he wasn’t the last
person Ryker expected to see. In fact, of all the people
who might have come looking for Ryker, this man - Pe-
ter Winter - was one of the most welcome. And least threatening.

‘Ah, you’re back.’ Winter got to his feet, a knowing smile on his face.

In his late thirties, Winter was similar in age to Ryker, and a similar height too at over six feet, but he was fresh-faced and scrawny and he had a knowing confidence that had often riled Ryker in the past.

‘How did you get in here?’ Ryker quizzed, the tone of his voice making it clear the visit wasn’t welcome. He continued to hold the gun out, pointed at the visitor. He didn’t believe Winter was an immediate threat, but he’d been through enough to know he couldn’t trust anyone one hundred percent.

Winter nodded over to the front door. ‘Not the same way you did, clearly. Good to see you’re still on your toes though.’

‘You’ve got no right coming into my home like this.’

Winter hesitated for a second. Ryker’s forthright tone and the fact he was still pointing a fully-loaded gun at Winter’s face had, Ryker could see, drained some of the confidence and ease from his former boss - a Commander at the secretive Joint Intelligence Agency where, in another life, Ryker had worked for nearly twenty years.

‘I’m not a threat,’ Winter assured him.

‘No. You’re not. If you were you’d have a bullet between your eyes already. How did you find me?’

‘By doing my job. Though I have to say, it wasn’t easy. You’ve covered your tracks well. Ryker? That’s your name now, right?’

‘That’s what my passport says.’

‘German?’

‘British.’

‘No, I mean the name, not your passport. It’s of German origin, isn’t it? From the German word for rich.’
‘If you say so,’ Ryker said, not hiding his disinterest in the analysis.
‘Almost seems ironic given what you left behind to come here.’
‘I figured I didn’t really need your money.’
‘You could have just told me that instead of disappearing.’
‘If I recall correctly, Ryker was also the name of a commander on Star Trek. So maybe the irony’s aimed at you, Commander.’
Winter huffed sarcastically. ‘That wouldn’t be irony, more of a taunt.’
Winter may have once been Ryker’s boss, but Ryker had never looked upon him as a superior. For starters, Winter had only assumed the role through default when the incumbent - Ryker’s long-time mentor - had been murdered outside a cafe in Omsk, Russia.
‘We set up a nice life for you,’ Winter said. ‘I’m not sure why you didn’t take it.’ He looked around the space he was standing in, turning his nose up at what he saw. ‘You certainly could have afforded a nicer place than this.’
‘There’s nothing wrong with this place. And I don’t need your money. Or you forever watching me.’
‘We gave you a new identity. A fresh start. We were helping you. Protecting you.’
‘Your idea was to keep me on a short leash should you ever need me. I’m sorry, but my idea of freedom is something different.’
Winter smiled. ‘So that’s what this is? Freedom?’
‘It’s the closest I’ve ever come.’
‘You’re partially right. I did always wonder whether I’d need you again. A man of your... skills is hard to come by.’
Ryker finally lowered his gun and stuffed it into his trousers’ waistband. ‘The answer’s no.’
Winter sat and looked pensively at Ryker for a few seconds. Ryker didn’t move, just waited for Winter to say what he’d come to say.
‘Look, Logan... Abbott, Ryker, whatever the hell your name is this week, I know you don’t want me here. I know you think you’ve earned your freedom. The right to live a life away from what you once were. But I never promised that. And I know deep down you never believed it. Part of me wonders whether you even want it.’

‘You know nothing about what I want or what I am.’

‘But I do. I’ve known you a long time. And you can’t just run away from who you are.’

‘It’s not me I’m running from.’

‘You sure about that? This isn’t a life. Hiding away like this, forever looking over your shoulder. And it’s not you. But I’m not going to sit here and try to convince you of that.’

‘Good. So I guess you’ll be leaving then.’

Winter got to his feet, and Ryker stepped to one side, giving his ex-boss a clear path to the front door.

‘But let me say this one thing,’ Winter added. ‘I found you. And you know I’m not the only person looking. I know you think you can deal with whatever or whoever is out there gunning for you, and I can guarantee you’ll give anyone who threatens you a damn good run for their money.’

‘Very flattering, Winter.’

‘Okay, look. This is beside the point. My real point is that I do still need you, Ryker.’

‘I won’t do it.’

‘Hear me out, please.’ Winter reached inside his jacket and Ryker couldn’t help but tense as he waited. The last thing he was expecting was for Winter to draw a weapon, but he could never rule it out. In the end, Winter’s hand emerged clutching some papers.

‘You know,’ Winter said. ‘You’re not the only person in the deep, dark world who wanted to get away from it all, who wanted to leave their past behind.’

Ryker raised an eyebrow.

‘I need your help, Ryker. It’s as simple as that.’
‘My help to do what?’
‘It’s about the Red Cobra.’
Winter stopped speaking and stared at Ryker. Ryker opened and closed his mouth, searching for the right words to describe the confusion that suddenly enveloped his mind.
The Red Cobra. A name from the past. A name forever burned into his memory. A rival, of sorts. A lover, more than once.
In the end, Ryker said nothing.
‘You remember her?’
‘Of course.’
‘We’ve found her.’
Ryker tried to betray no emotion, but Winter had him. Of all the possible bombshells, this had to be one of the biggest.
‘Where?’ Ryker asked.
‘In Spain.’
‘Then what do you need me for? You want me to kill her?’
Even as he said the words, Ryker questioned whether that was something he’d be able to do. At one time, certainly. But now?
‘I’d say it’s a little late for that,’ Winter responded. ‘We already found the Red Cobra. Dead. She’s been murdered.’
CHAPTER 5

Ryker needed a few moments to compose himself. Both men took a seat. Winter didn’t push Ryker. He’d laid down the bait. Now he seemed content to wait and let Ryker sweat over it.

The Red Cobra. A blast from the past. Her real name was Anna Abayev, though even Ryker - who’d come closer to her than most - had never known her by that moniker. She was an assassin. Born and bred. Highly trained but with a lethal hard edge that was simply part of her nature, her DNA.

Much of Ryker’s skill had been taught and nurtured by the JIA, a clandestine agency operated jointly by the UK and US governments. A long and gruelling schooling period with the JIA had turned Ryker into a robotic operative. Ryker had Charles McCabe to thank for that. Mackie. His old boss who’d taken a bullet to the head when his secretive life had finally caught up with him.

That was all in Ryker’s past, though. He wasn’t that man anymore, even though he still had a deadly set of skills that few others possessed, as Winter said. The Red Cobra on the other hand... she really was something else.

‘The car outside-’

‘Backup. In case you decided to run,’ Winter confirmed. ‘Or turned on us.’
‘What were you going to do? Mow me down? Shoot me?’

Winter shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t have wanted to. But I wasn’t sure how you’d react to me finding you.’
‘So you covered all bases. Just in case.’
‘What more would you expect?’

Both men’s attention was grabbed by the sound of the front door opening. Ryker stood, turned, and stared as Lisa walked in. Her long brown hair was wet and clung to her shoulders. She had a large and colourful beach towel wrapped around her glistening and tanned body, her toned physique clear. Ryker felt a sense of betrayal slice through him. Because of Winter or because he’d been reminiscing about Anna Abayev?

Lisa was half a step inside when she spotted Ryker. She smiled. But when she saw Winter, her face went pale.

‘Angela,’ Winter said. ‘Or should I call you Lisa now?’

‘You shouldn’t call me anything,’ she grunted, before turning to Ryker. ‘What is he doing here?’
‘We were getting onto that,’ Ryker said.
‘Please, Lisa, come and sit down.’
‘I’d rather not.’ She moved over to the fridge, took a bottle of water then padded across the floor to the bedroom. ‘James, get rid of him.’ She slammed the bedroom door shut.

Winter looked at Ryker for a few seconds. Neither man said a word. Lisa’s demand reverberated in Ryker’s mind. She was right. He shouldn’t even have been contemplating helping Winter. He should have thrown him out of there the second he’d laid eyes on him.

But then what? Run away as far and as fast as they could once more? Another new location? Two more new identities?

Maybe that was what Lisa wanted. But it wasn’t what Ryker wanted. Not really.

Despite his protestation, even before Winter had mentioned the Red Cobra, Ryker had already been un-
decided as to whether he would agree to Winter’s request for help. Together, Ryker and Lisa had set about making a life for themselves, just the two of them. Away from the chaos that had clouded their lives, their relationship, for so long. It wasn’t them against the world anymore. It was just... them. Yet deep down, he wasn’t satisfied. Not completely. There was something missing.

Isn’t that basic human nature, though? Hasn’t every single one of the many billions of humans who have walked the earth felt the same way? Always clamouring for the perfect life but never quite reaching it, always wanting more. The grass is always greener. At least that was Ryker’s way of justifying how he felt.

And hearing the name Red Cobra... How could he not at least hear Winter out now?

‘How do you know it’s her?’ Ryker asked.

‘Purely by accident.’ Winter was still clutching the papers he’d taken from his pocket as though waiting to deal his full hand - should he need to. ‘She was killed three days ago. At her home in southern Spain.’

‘Who killed her?’

‘That was one thing I was hoping you might help with.’

‘I’m not sure what’s in it for me.’

‘What do you want? Money?’

‘To be left alone.’

‘I can’t figure out if you’ve actually managed to convince yourself of that or not.’

‘Would it make a difference to you either way?’

‘No. Because I need you. It’s as simple as that. You got close to her. Closer than anyone else I know.’

‘I tried to kill her. And it’s not much of a surprise that she’s dead now. Only that it took so long for someone to find her.’

‘Longer than it’s taken to find you, that’s for sure. Though keeping your tracks clean when there’s two of you is always going to be harder.’
Ryker couldn’t help but be offended by the state-
ment, yet he knew it was true. The Red Cobra had dis-
appeared nearly eight years earlier after jumping off a
cliff in the middle of the night in northern Germany
with three bullets in her.

Eight years. Not a sniff of her since then.
He and Lisa had been on the run for less than one
year.

‘Maybe her death isn’t really a surprise,’ Winter
continued. ‘And if we’d found her first then perhaps
the outcome would have been the same. And therein
lies the problem.’

‘How so?’

‘This wasn’t a random attack. Someone found her.
They butchered her. This was a statement. Revenge.’

Winter threw down the papers he’d been holding
onto the coffee table. Ryker leaned forward and
 glanced at them - photographs. He used his hand to sift
through them. His heart pounded as he scanned the
gory images. Butchered. Winter hadn’t been wrong.
There was little left of the poor woman to identify
what was what.

Although he didn’t outwardly react, Ryker was
shocked by what he saw. He wasn’t unaccustomed to
seeing dead bodies, or even to killing people, but such
viciousness would never fail to trouble him. It brought
closer to the surface his own painful memories.

‘We don’t know who did this,’ Winter said. ‘But we
need to find out. And soon. There’s very possibly a leak
within our own intelligence services.’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘The Red Cobra had a lot of enemies. Not just
agencies like the JIA but all sorts of criminal gangs
across the world who’d fallen foul of her... services.’

‘But why do you think this was a leak?’

‘We had a profile of the Red Cobra.’

Ryker raised an eyebrow. ‘And?’

‘For years, she carried out her work without leav-
ing so much as a hint of tangible evidence. But we had
a set of fingerprints linked to that profile - from way back, before she was an operative.’

‘And the dead woman matches those fingerprints.’

‘Exactly. She was going under an alias - Kim Walker. British, supposedly. When the local police in Spain brought the murder to the attention of the British authorities, there was no record of this woman in any databases. She had a passport, a driver’s licence, both fakes, but nothing else. No birth records, no employment records, or anything else that matched the identity. The Spanish police took her fingerprints, passed them over to the Met to help the police identify her.’

‘And when Scotland Yard ran those fingerprints in the system it alerted the JIA.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Do the police know that?’

‘No. The profile is heavily restricted. The police search would simply have shown no match. But the Met have assigned one of their detectives to help find out who this woman really was. He’s in Spain already, working with the police there.’

‘You still haven’t explained how you think there’s been a leak.’

‘When the alert came in, we did some checks in the metadata of our systems. There’s a record of her profile being accessed a little over a week ago. It wasn’t highlighted at the time because the access was from a legitimate user account on a terminal at MI5 headquarters. Or so it seemed.’

‘But the user had no idea what you were talking about when you questioned them.’ Ryker made speech marks with his fingers as he emphasised the word that significantly played down the lengths to which the JIA would go to get answers. He wondered what had happened to the poor sod whose ID had been compromised.

‘It’s not an inside job,’ Winter said. ‘At least not by that user. He’s clean. But someone somewhere found a way into the system.’
‘Sounds professional.’
‘Professional, yes. Official? We don’t know. It’s possible the hack was the work of another agency but the nature of the death suggests otherwise. Like I said, this was a revenge attack. Personal. Regardless, someone accessed our system to find information on the Red Cobra. And now she’s dead.’

Ryker looked down at the photographs again. At what was left of the poor woman’s face. ‘Except she’s not.’

Winter raised an eyebrow. ‘Not what?’
‘The Red Cobra isn’t dead.’

Winter glanced down at the bloody images then back at Ryker, confusion on his face.

‘I know her,’ Ryker said. ‘I know her better than almost anyone else who’s alive. You had a profile on the Red Cobra? Your profile was wrong.’ Ryker tapped the pictures in front of him. The blood-stained face of a dead woman he’d never seen before. ‘I don’t know who that poor woman is, but I can tell you with certainty that she isn’t the Red Cobra.’
When Winter left, Ryker locked the front door then double-checked the remaining doors and windows. Satisfied everything was secure, he walked over to the closed bedroom door. He let out a deep sigh and turned the handle.

Lisa was lying on the bed, facing away from him. Her hair was still wet but her bronzed skin was now dry and matte, and she was dressed - a pair of shorts and a loose fitting cotton top. Ryker guessed she’d showered following her saltwater swim - an almost-daily routine. He could see from the reflection in the mirror on the far side of the room that she was awake. Ryker moved over and lay down on the bed next to her. His body aligned with her curves, fitting into her naturally as it always did, and he couldn’t help but feel a fleeting moment of arousal before she spoke.

‘You agreed to help him.’ She wasn’t angry, more disappointed. But was it disappointment in him or just in the way that life works out?

‘I have to.’

‘No, you don’t. You could have said no.’

‘And then what?’

‘And then nothing. Winter would go away. He’s not going to have you killed, or give up your new identity, just because you refused to help him.’
‘Probably not,’ Ryker said, though he knew he could never rule out such a thing.
‘Then why did you say yes?’
‘Because this one really is my problem.’
Lisa shuffled, half-turning so that she was facing him.
‘You wanted this, didn’t you?’
Ryker took a couple of seconds too long to reply. His silence gave away his answer. ‘I need to do this. You can change my name, you can give me money, you can send me to any corner of the world to live as a free man. But a small part of who I once was will always remain inside of me. That’s the man you fell in love with.’
‘I know. It’s not that I don’t love him. It’s just that I’m... scared. Scared that if you go out there - even if it’s for the right reasons - you may not come back to me.’
‘I’ll always come back.’
‘Not if you’re in a coffin, you won’t.’
‘That’s not going to happen.’
‘Don’t you think we’ve been through enough troubles?’
He considered her words, which significantly downplayed the deadly situations they’d fought together. Through it all, he’d always felt an unwavering loyalty to her and a desire to keep her from harm - even though at times it seemed like his loyalty was misplaced.
Ryker remained silent and Lisa looked away from him again. In many ways he was surprised that she was being this amenable. There he was, on the brink of destroying the ever-so-fragile life they had been building and her protest was mild to say the least. Either she was keeping her anger bottled up or she’d seen this moment coming. Was his going back to the JIA just an inevitable outcome?
‘What’s the job?’ she asked.
‘I can’t say.’
‘If you want me to support you on this maybe you should.’
‘I need to find someone. Someone else who doesn’t want to be found.’
‘How apt.’
‘Indeed.’
‘A woman?’
The question was double-edged but he wasn’t about to wait. ‘Yes.’
‘You know her?’
‘From a long time ago.’
‘Huh.’
Ryker knew what she was thinking but he didn’t try to defend himself. He saw no point. What had happened between him and the Red Cobra was in a different life. ‘You could come with me.’
Lisa smiled. ‘No. This, here, this is my life now. With you. Angela Grainger, FBI agent, is dead. She was killed in a shootout in a car park in Beijing. Remember?’
‘I remember. Carl Logan, English spy, was killed out there too.’
‘The fugitive lovers.’
‘That’s what the papers said. A real life Bonnie and Clyde.’
‘And when are the press ever wrong?’ Lisa smiled again.
‘But you’re not dead,’ Ryker assured. ‘I still see Angela inside you every day. And I like her.’
‘You like her?’ Lisa teased.
‘I love her.’
‘Then come home to her.’
‘I will. I promise.’
CHAPTER 7

Before he’d left, Winter had passed to Ryker the profile, put together by MI5, MI6, and the JIA, on Anna Abayev, also known as the Red Cobra, plus some papers outlining the investigation so far into Kim Walker’s murder. Ryker perused the files as he sat in the back of a taxi on the way to the airport. He’d destroyed them and discarded the remnants by the time he boarded the plane that would take him to the mainland before he headed onward across the ocean to Barcelona and then Malaga.

The details Ryker had read were still flowing through his mind as he walked up the steps to enter the turboprop plane. The profile on the Red Cobra was sparse to say the least. Anna Abayev’s fingerprints had been on record from a double-murder that had taken place in Georgia in the mid-1990s. The young Anna – just sixteen at the time - had vanished from the scene and details of her movements and whereabouts in the following years were flimsy at best. In fact, Ryker reckoned he held more detailed knowledge of the Red Cobra’s methods and movements in his brain than the UK’s intelligence services had managed to gather on her in almost two decades. But then there weren’t many people who had come as close to her as Ryker.

He took his seat by the window and watched the other passengers clambering on board. Headspace and
leg-space was limited in the cramped cabin and Ryker, with his height and bulk, willed the seat next to him to remain empty. The last passenger to board the plane however - a bearded and bespectacled man in his forties, Ryker guessed - bumped and squeezed into the seat next to Ryker, apologising as he did so.

Ryker murmured in acknowledgment before his busy mind took him back to the task at hand, and the conversation with Winter the previous day.

‘Who will I be working for?’ Ryker had asked.
‘You’ll be working for me,’ Winter said.
‘The JIA?’
‘Not exactly.’
‘Who knows about this then? Me being involved, I mean.’
‘Only me and those who need to know.’ Winter paused.

Ryker remained tight-lipped, waiting for the Commander to add to his vague responses.

‘We’ve set up a full cover identity for you,’ Winter said eventually. ‘If that’s what you’re worried about. Birth records, university, electoral, taxes, it’s all there.’

Ryker raised an eyebrow as the words sunk in. Winter had gone to a lot of trouble already in setting up Ryker for the job. Which meant he’d always expected Ryker would agree to help. Ryker felt a little foolish about that.

‘What’s the story?’
‘You’re a freelance investigator. Appointed by the Home Office to assist the Metropolitan Police. You don’t have any legal jurisdiction in Spain, but then neither does the Met, and I’m not sending you out there to make an arrest. I need to know what’s happening. Who killed Kim Walker and why. And why that dead woman is linked to the Red Cobra’s profile.’

‘Name?’
‘James Ryker,’ Winter said with a wry smile. Ryker glared at his ex-boss, bit his tongue.
‘It was easier that way. I’ve had to pull a lot of strings to get this far. Using an identity you’d already created made more sense.’

Ryker still said nothing, but he was angry. Winter had chosen to use Ryker’s now-real identity for an undercover operation. It felt like a kick in the teeth. As though Ryker’s new existence, his identity, was of no importance to Winter or the JIA. He still belonged to them.

‘James Ryker has been brought in because he has real-life experience of hunting the Red Cobra,’ Winter said. ‘So feel free to use details of your own experiences with her.’

‘I thought you said the Met doesn’t know about the Red Cobra? That they’re trying to figure out who Kim Walker really was?’

‘They don’t, yet. But it’s the easiest angle to get you - and keep you - in there. We’re not going to publicise it to the world, but we’ll make sure the right people know.’

‘The detective who’s out there, who is he?’

‘His name is Paul Green. Work with him as much or as little as you like. I’ve never met him, haven’t got a clue how good he is. I’ll leave that to you to figure out.’

‘And what about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘What’s your involvement going to be?’

‘You’re my involvement. I thought this was something you’d be able to handle on your own.’

‘Yeah. It is.’

‘But don’t for a second think that means this isn’t a big deal. Because it is. We don’t know how far this problem stretches. Our system contains details of thousands of highly confidential operations; names of agents, informants. Someone has breached that system. If that information gets into the wrong hands, then the lives of hundreds of people at MI5, MI6, the JIA could be on the line.’
‘Mine included?’
‘No. You’re already dead, remember?’

Winter smiled again. Ryker didn’t. The play seemed simple enough. A big deal? Ryker had seen bigger. The computer system had been hacked once, but according to Winter all that had been accessed was a limited profile of a wanted assassin. Gaining access to details of agents, informants and operations was surely another matter altogether.

Was the JIA really worried that could happen? Maybe they were. Either way, Ryker got the impression Winter hadn’t yet declared his full hand. If the threat were as big and as real as Winter was suggesting then something else must have tipped off the JIA. Another hacking attempt. Knowledge of other profiles being accessed. Agents already compromised. It was possible. But there was another, more worrying, possibility that Ryker saw.

Why was the JIA so concerned about the Red Cobra all of a sudden? Particularly if they’d thought she was the dead woman right up until Ryker had set the record straight. She was a wanted criminal, not an agent. So what was it about her that the JIA wanted to keep under wraps? It wouldn’t be the first time in his life that Ryker had been used as a pawn to hide the dirty secrets of the governments he worked for.

Ryker was brought out of his thoughts when the man sitting next to him knocked a bundle of papers into his lap. The man apologised profusely as he frantically collected up his belongings.

‘It’s not a problem,’ Ryker said as he handed the last of the papers back to the man.

Ryker looked over and saw he had a laptop computer laid out on his fold-down tray. The papers he’d dropped were full of printed type. Ryker, having glanced for a couple of seconds, deduced their context. ‘You’re a writer.’
‘Yes,’ the man said, looking surprised. ‘How did you know?’

Ryker nodded at the papers.

‘A nature writer,’ the man said, sounding enthused. ‘I’ve been out here for three months, keeping a diary. I’m hoping to turn it into a book. Did you know some of the rarest snakes in the world are found right here on this island? It’s a real hotbed. I’ve been searching for them, recording them.’

‘No. I didn’t know that.’ Ryker turned away from the man, hoping he could avoid entering into a lengthy discussion about searching for rare snakes. He’d never trusted writers. Never trusted anyone who took pleasure in writing everything down, recording it. Making it permanent. He wanted to leave as little evidence of his existence as he could.

‘So what do you do?’ the man asked.

‘Whatever it takes,’ Ryker said, staring straight ahead.

Then he shut his eyes, memories of the Red Cobra still sloshing in his mind as he drifted off to sleep.
CHAPTER 8

Nineteen years earlier

Anna Abayev was nearly fourteen the day she was introduced to Colonel Kankava, a beast of a man who changed her forever. She’d been living in Georgia for five years, a period of real stability for her family, if not for the country in which she was living.

Contrary to popular belief of those who knew of her, Anna wasn’t Russian by birth but was actually Serbian. Her Russian father had met a young local woman while working in the former Yugoslavia in the early eighties, a number of years before the country had torn itself apart in civil war. Anna had never known her mother, she’d died during childbirth. Anna had always felt guilt over that, even though her father never made any suggestion that he blamed his daughter for her mother’s passing.

Anna’s father had long despised his home country’s then communist regime. His dismissal of his own people was a move which had seen him gather many enemies in the country he called home. They’d spent time in countless countries during her early childhood, always on the move to stay safe and to allow her father to take on jobs to keep providing. It was to Georgia that Anna had the strongest affiliation.

The country, newly independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, had been going through a period of immense turmoil. The economy was
in free-fall and rival factions vied for control of the country leading to various bloody coups and internal conflicts. Hardly the perfect environment for bringing up a young family.

Despite this, Georgia was the place - perhaps due to familiarity as much as anything else - that Anna thought of as home.

Although her father had amassed sufficient money for them to live securely during the preceding years, without his needing to work and travel as he had done during Anna's earlier childhood, resources were running thin and it was becoming more and more difficult for him to turn down the offers for his specialist work. Plus, having been in one place for so long, he was becoming increasingly paranoid that the wolves from his past were closing in.

Anna had sensed for a number of weeks that something would have to give.

‘But I could come with you?’ she protested as her father led her by the hand up the tree-lined driveway on a snowy winter’s morning. The crooked branches on the leafless trees silhouetted against the moody sky made the entire scene sinister. With each step they took, Anna grew increasingly terrified of what lay beyond the walls of the crumbling blue-and-white-painted mansion, where her father was sending her to work as a domestic maid.

‘No, Anna,’ her father said, sternly but with warmth. ‘You need to stay here and go to school. You’re getting big now. Your education is important. And you can earn good money here while I’m gone. The Colonel will pay you to help the soldiers.’

Her father had explained that Kankava was a former colonel in the Soviet Army. A native Georgian who, following independence, had aligned himself with the Mkhedrioni paramilitary group who were vying for control of the country. Despite the Mkhedrioni succeeding in overthrowing the government in a violent and bloody coup d’état in 1992, further in-fighting led to their
eventual outlawing in 1995. Kankava had taken that as his opportunity to retire and set up a small charitable foundation for wounded war veterans. He bought a once-grand eighteenth-century mansion, renovated it, and opened the doors to some forty veterans who shared the same sympathetic nationalist views as Kankava.

Anna had no interest in the veterans or their politics. She just wanted to be with her father. ‘But why can’t you stay too?’ Anna stopped walking. ‘You said you’d always look after me. Protect me.’

A tear escaped Anna’s eye. It began to roll down her cheek but stopped after a couple of seconds.

‘I can’t, Anna. It’s become too... dangerous.’

Her father didn’t elaborate and Anna didn’t probe. She knew her father’s business put him in a dangerous position, that he had many enemies, but he never talked about it in any detail. They had come to an unspoken understanding that she’d never ask and he’d never tell. See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil. Or something like that.

‘When will you be back?’ she asked.

‘As soon as I can.’


‘It means as soon as I can.’

Anna didn’t push him. It really didn’t matter what she said in protest. He’d already made his decision. And it was final. She knew that.

They continued walking. Anna tried her best to hold back the tears that were welling.

When they reached the over-sized doors to the house - bare oak that was crumbling at the corners - her father reached out and rang the bell.

After a few seconds, the door creaked open. Beyond the fatigue-clad man who stood in the entrance, Anna caught sight of the wood-panelled walls and military paraphernalia that adorned the interior. The smell of the home that wafted out of the open door made
her nose tingle and she cringed: furniture polish, boiled vegetables. Bleach to overpower urine and faeces, and whatever else. It smelled of... oldness.

Death and decay. That was all that lay within the walls of that house, Anna decided.

Anna looked at the man who had opened the door. One arm of his military fatigues hung clumsily by his side. An amputee. He was grey-haired. Young Anna had no idea how old he was. He could have been anything from fifty to ninety. To her he was simply old, that was all she knew. A thick beard covered his face reaching up close to his eyes, which were steel-grey. He stared down at Anna and the sides of his mouth turned upward as if in a knowing smile.

‘This must be Anna,’ he said, after shaking her father’s hand.

‘Yes. My precious Anna,’ her father said, ruffling her hair like she was still five years old. ‘You take good care of her for me.’

‘Oh, I will.’

‘Anna, this is Colonel Kankava. He’s in charge here. Anything you ever need, you ask him.’

‘Come on, Anna, let me show you around.’

The Colonel extended his hand. Anna looked at her father then back at the face of Kankava whom she already detested. But she did her best to bury her true feelings and took his hand. He led her inside. She turned to her father who was still standing on the step outside.

‘Angel, I’ve got to go now,’ he said.

‘No!’ Anna shook the Colonel off her, and moved back to her father but he held up his hand. ‘Please. I’ll be back soon. I promise.’

‘No. Don’t leave me here! You can’t!’

Her father said nothing. He hung his head. Tears cascaded down Anna’s face. She continued to protest but it made no difference. Kankava edged past her and gently shut the door.
Thus bringing to a close the life of Anna Abayev, the girl.

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Rob Sinclair
2018 - Paris, France

Faces had always stayed with him. He could walk past a thousand people in a busy market square and pick out a familiar face in an instant, even people he hadn’t seen in years.

From the threadbare sofa in that wreck of a Paris apartment, Aydin watched the still images of men’s faces flash up one by one on the flickering TV screen. The documentary was supposed to be about the youths of Jihad; the young guys from Western Europe who travelled to the Middle East to fight for their religion. But so far all he’d seen were thugs who’d taken it upon themselves to pick up guns and bombs to live out some violent fantasy. Was it boredom that made them do it?

All he knew was that these men weren’t the real problem for the West. Nor was it the weak-minded individuals who were so easily swayed into strapping plastic explosives to their chests. So far the real faces of Terror hadn’t featured in the programme at all. The millions of people watching had no idea who those people were. But Aydin knew. Because they were the ones who created him, and the others like him, the ones who told him what to do.

A much more familiar face flashed on the screen. His name and ‘title’ appeared beneath the grainy photograph of his face, but the words did nothing to describe the full extent of the man’s remit. ‘Aziz al-Ad-
dad, Head of Youth Training’. To Aydin and his brothers the man was simply the Teacher.

Aydin couldn’t hear the TV anymore for the sudden onrush of memories the man’s grinning face induced in him - his barked orders, spitting venom. Aydin could hear the Teacher telling him what he had to do, his eyes bulging. His was the only way Aydin knew.

Shaking, Aydin turned off the TV.

Minutes later he was outside roaming the streets. In the district of Clichy-Sous-Bois he was just a few miles from Paris’s most treasured landmarks, yet in that shithole of a neighbourhood he felt several worlds away. To Aydin, the whole district was a mess of clashing cultures. Paris was the world’s capital of romance, but he couldn’t see any of that - decay and misery were too prevalent, and violence both the cause and answer to most problems.

He kept his head down as he walked past a gang of black youths. Did they appreciate that they were no longer the centre of the white man’s ire in the city? People like Aydin had taken that mantle.

Round the next corner he reached the same car he’d walked past dozens of times on similar nights: a battered Citroën older than he was. The street was quiet. He slipped a length of wire down the side of the Citroën’s rusted window frame and released the lock. Within seconds he was sitting in the driver’s seat, his head swimming.

He’d hot-wired the car several times in the last few months, repeating the same ritualistic series of events. Had sat there with the engine turning over loudly, thinking about driving off into the night. He never had.

He wondered who the car belonged to. Did they have any idea it had been broken into? The car was always in the same spot, a thick layer of dust covering its corroded shell. It was clear it hadn’t been moved
for some time. Maybe its owner had died, or moved home and left the crappy tin can behind.

Aydin was snapped from his thoughts when he saw two men further down the street, coming his way. In the darkness, he couldn’t make out their features, though both had their heads covered with hoods. As they approached, Aydin felt his heart rate quicken. It wasn’t fear or apprehension, simply his body ready and primed for the possible threat. He pushed the gear stick into first and released the handbrake, grasping his hands tightly round the steering wheel. As the men walked beneath a streetlight their faces were caught in a flash of orange light and Aydin avoided their gazes. Did they know who they were looking at? His mind was busy trying to determine whether to thump his foot down on the accelerator and hurtle off, when the men carried on past before fading into the darkness.

After a few seconds Aydin heaved a sigh, wrenched the handbrake, killed the engine, and stepped out into the night.

Twenty-four hours later Aydin was walking the same dark street. A long and tiring day of planning had left him weary both in body and mind, and the walk through the fresh Parisian night wasn’t yet making him feel rejuvenated. Not least because he knew this night would end - just like all the others - with nothing but disappointment.

No. This night was worse. As he approached the spot, he realised the Citroën wasn’t there. He spun round, looking up and down the street. No sign of it anywhere. Just an empty space, a dark outline of tarmac around where the car had been sitting untouched for so long.

A thief? After all, the car had been unlocked for some time. Or had the owner finally reunited with the heap of junk?
Regardless, Aydin’s heart sank, as though his one solace - that dream of another life - had been torn from him.

Confused, he couldn’t face going back to the safe house so soon. Instead he sat on a wall in the dark, took out his phone and dialled the number from memory.

‘Hello?’ The woman’s soft voice filled his ear, her English accent smooth in the dark. He shut his eyes and kept the patchy image of her smiling face in his mind as long as he could before it cracked and faded away.

‘Hello?’ she said again. ‘Who is this?’

He hung up. He didn’t want to spook her, just to hear her voice.

When Aydin opened the apartment’s front door almost an hour later he heard the noise of the TV, and saw the lights were on. He’d hoped Khaled would be in bed, but he was sitting upright on the sofa, a sickly grin on his face.

‘Hey, Talatashar, come and see this.’

Talatashar: the number thirteen in Arabic. By birth he was Aydin, but among his people he was referred to only by number.

He slumped down beside Khaled, his attention turning to the BBC World news report playing on the TV: helicopter footage of the destruction caused by a suicide bomb attack at a market in Aleppo. Over twenty people were already known to have died, the report claimed.

‘Good work, eh?’ Khaled said, still smiling.

Aydin said nothing. Khaled was in his thirties - an administrator, and Aydin’s link to those who gave the orders. They weren’t friends, their relationship was one of necessity. Aydin’s ill feelings towards the man were nothing to do with their relative positions in the hierarchy, he simply hated everything about him.

The stench of sweat and tobacco stuck in Aydin’s nose as Khaled rambled excitedly about ‘infidels’ and
‘our holy war’. Khaled’s was a face Aydin would do well to forget: that large scar stretching from his right eye to his left ear; those yellowed, misshapen teeth.

‘And so it begins,’ Khaled proclaimed. He often spoke as if he knew what was really going on, the real story. His smile grew. ‘This is just the start.’

Khaled seemed to take issue with Aydin’s silence and his smirk dropped away - irked, as he often was, by Aydin’s apparent lack of enthusiasm.

‘Allah looks upon all martyrs with the same regard, Talatashar,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing special about you.’

It was true, Aydin knew. He didn’t see himself as special - none of them were.

Aydin fixed his gaze on the TV as the reporter continued. One of the known victims of the blast was a British citizen: a woman in her twenties, working in Aleppo with an international humanitarian charity. He didn’t recognise her name, but then came her picture, a small square nestled in the top corner of the screen. She was a similar age to him, her eyes squinting from the sun, a bright, red lanyard dangling around her neck.

He froze.

It felt like he couldn’t move at all. For a moment he wondered if his heart had stopped beating.

After a few agonising seconds, he slowly exhaled, his eyes still fixed on the face of the young woman. Her eyes. The rest of her face could have been covered but he would still know those eyes. Faces had always stayed with him. He’d not seen hers since he was a child - since the night he was taken from his bed - but he had absolutely no doubt that the dead charity worker was Nilay. His twin sister.
Aydin began to shake again, but it was caused by something else entirely this time. He was losing control.

‘There’ll be no place in paradise for that bitch, or any of the others,’ Khaled said.

Aydin closed his eyes tight, trying to shut out Khaled’s voice.

Soon everything was drowned out by the onset of rage, the throbbing of blood in his ears. As he struggled to control it, he saw his mother and twin sister Nilay in flashes.

By the time Khaled slapped Aydin’s head to snap him out of the trance, it was too late. Aydin released a deep, guttural yell and threw his elbow out in an arc, catching Khaled in the left eye and causing his head to jerk back. He shot up from the sofa and glared down, snarling, panting. He tried to hold back, to control the beast, to not let it conquer him - but it wasn’t working.

‘Sometimes I wish you’d just shut that ugly fucking mouth of yours for more than five seconds,’ Aydin said, fists clenched at his sides. He took a deep breath and stepped back, in two minds as to whether the situation could be diffused from there, or if it had already gone too far.

‘What the fuck is your problem anyway?’ Khaled spat, holding a hand up to his bruised face. ‘You care so much about some little Western whore?’

Aydin’s eyes remained on him. He could see Khaled was fuming, even as he glanced to the coffee table.
where the blunt knife he’d earlier used to peel an apple lay next to the twisted skin and discarded core.

Part of him willed Khaled to make the move.

For a moment they were both looking at the knife.

Aydin lunged first, but Khaled was closer. He grabbed the blade and was up on his feet in a flash. He was a good four or five inches taller than Aydin, and a few inches thicker too. Much of the extra mass was muscle, and Aydin guessed most people would steer well clear of him under challenge.

But Aydin wasn’t most people.

He was on Khaled before the administrator could swing the blade round in an arc towards Aydin’s side, and he blocked easily and countered with a jab that split Khaled’s lip. Khaled came forward a second time, but Aydin blocked with force again, feeling a jarring in his lower arm from the impact of the blow, as if he’d smacked it against a lump of steel. But it didn’t stop him. Khaled was big and strong, but he wasn’t like Aydin.

They had made damn sure of that.

Again Khaled attacked, with everything he had left - fist and knife and feet, over and over. Aydin moved in a steady rhythm to thwart his every move, an autopilot he’d developed from childhood but had never had to utilise for real until now. Before long, a look of defeat crept across his opponent’s face.

Then a straight fist flew towards him - a final, futile attempt. Aydin shimmied to the left, caught the arm, and swivelled. Bringing his other arm around Khaled’s neck, Aydin sent him spinning over his knee and crashing to the ground. He grabbed Khaled’s knife hand, twisted it around and pushed the wrist back until it cracked. Khaled screamed in pain and dropped the blade. Aydin twisted the arm further and smacked just below the shoulder, hearing the pop as the arm dislocated. He picked up the knife and stood over Khaled who panted and wheezed.
'I was right to keep my eye on you,' Khaled spluttered through pained breaths. ‘I knew you were too weak to see this through.’

Aydin said nothing.

Khaled turned over and crawled away. Aydin watched him struggle, but another snapshot of his sister’s face burned suddenly in his eyes and he had to press his palms to his temples.

Would she have wanted him to finish this?

He snapped out of it to discover Khaled reaching up for the laptop, which sat atop the battered formica dining table across the room. The injured administrator mashed the keyboard with a broken hand, and a second later a long tone signalled the software’s attempt to connect the call.

Aydin couldn’t let that happen.

He darted forward, lurched at Khaled. He lifted his foot and hurled it under Khaled’s chin. His head whipped back at such an angle Aydin wondered if he’d broken his neck. His head bounced forward again, his face smacked sickly against the lino floor. Aydin plunged the knife into the side of Khaled’s neck and yanked it out the front, tearing a gaping hole in the flesh from which the man’s blood sprayed out.

Spinning round, Aydin reached out to kill the call on the laptop . . . but the dial tone had already stopped.

He hoped - prayed - that the call hadn’t gone through, that it had simply timed out. Then he saw the all too familiar browser window open up. Just a plain black screen, the same as always. He knew on the other end of the line his face would be clearly visible.

His face, dripping with Khaled’s blood.

Breathing hissed through the laptop’s speakers; slow, deliberate and calm breaths. Aydin stared at the blank screen, unable to move, as though it was a black hole sucking every ounce of energy from him.

‘Why?’ was all he could think to say. No answer. ‘Why her!’ His voice was hoarse as the well of emotion
overflowed. Anger, sorrow, regret - he wasn’t sure which was in control.

Still no answer.

A short bleep sounded and the call disconnected, the black screen replaced by generic Microsoft wallpaper. Aydin knew exactly what that meant.

Hurriedly he grabbed the only possessions he needed - the stash of money in a hole in the wall behind the bathroom cabinet, the pistol, and his pocket multi-tool. He left the several fake passports behind. Despite their undoubted quality, he couldn’t use them now.

Outside, he walked quickly down the street and took out his phone. He stopped to turn it on and thought about calling her again. After a few moments he stuck the phone back in his pocket and continued walking.

He headed on past the spot where the Citroën used to be, ignoring the nagging in his mind - why hadn’t he just gone when he’d had the chance?

For once he was at least glad he lived in such a desperate neighbourhood, and it wasn’t long before he found a Fiat that was in barely a better state than his departed companion the Citroën.

After checking the dark street was clear, he took out the multi-tool and used the flathead screwdriver and a bit of muscle to pop the lock and the door open. Less than a minute later he had the engine running. For a few moments he just sat there as the engine grumbled in his ear.

This time he really didn’t have any choice.

With a look over his shoulder, he pulled out into the night, no clear destination in mind. Only one thing was clear: he was on his own.
CHAPTER 3

Aleppo, Syria

Rachel Cox stared out of the window of the seventh-floor apartment, gazing across the twinkling nightscape of the city. In the near distance she could make out what remained of the Al-Madina Souq, treasured buildings that had once formed part of the original ancient city that had seen continuous habitation for over eight millennia. Yet look what had become of it. Even at night the thin orange illumination was enough to highlight the destruction of the still raging civil war. On top of the monumental human loss, many treasured buildings were now nothing more than piles of sandy rubble. Cox would never cease to feel sadness to see a city she had grown to know so well look so vulnerable and decrepit and seemingly beyond repair - and not just its buildings, but its inhabitants too.

The sound of her vibrating phone stole Cox’s attention from the window and the misery outside it. She moved over to the scratched and stained wooden side table and picked up the phone. A text message. White line, five minutes.

Cox put the phone back down and went over to the crumpled sofa covered in a faded sheet, where her high-spec laptop sat. The city may be in ruins, but Cox wasn’t without budget, and if you had the resources you could still get all the mod cons in Aleppo one way or another - electronics, mobile phone signal and even
wifi. Up in the safe house, operated by the UK’s Secret Intelligence Service, Cox had all that and more.

She flipped open the lid on the laptop and went through the familiar routine to initiate the white line - a voiceover IP line that was encrypted through a secure real-time transport protocol, or SRTP for short. It meant that both of the devices on either end of the conversation were encrypted, as was the line itself. The system wasn’t foolproof, nothing involving the internet was, but it was as secure a communication channel as SIS had for transnational conversations with active agents.

Of course, the multi-layered security on the line was to prevent sophisticated computer hackers from listening in, but did nothing to deter more classical eavesdropping techniques, which was why the otherwise plain-looking safe house was professionally sound-proofed, and why Cox swept the place every day for listening devices, just to be on the safe side.

‘Rachel Cox on the line,’ she said when the call connected after a few seconds.

‘Cox, it’s Flannigan and Roger Miles here,’ came the crackly voice of her immediate boss after a short delay - the less than perfect sound quality a result both of the geographic distance and the heavy security measures.

Cox did her best not to let out a loud groan. Henry Flannigan, the man she reported to, was a level four supervisor back at Vauxhall Cross in London - SIS headquarters. She’d worked for Flannigan for several years and the two of them had plenty of professional baggage between them. Their shared headstrong nature meant they regularly butted heads, but overall she thought he was an okay guy, as long as she did as he asked, and if his arrogance and general superior attitude could be excused. Roger Miles was a level six director, the highest rank before numbers stopped and plain old extravagant titles took over, just a few small pay grades from the SIS Chief himself, right at the top
of the food chain. Cox didn’t know too much about him on a personal level, just that generally when he got involved in matters it meant there was a problem. Often it felt like the problem was her.

‘Evening,’ Cox said. ‘You’re both in the office still?’

She looked at her watch. It was gone eleven p.m. in Aleppo, so after nine back in London.

‘Your request was urgent so we dealt with it urgently,’ Flannigan answered.

Cox felt herself tense up. She could almost tell by the way he said it what the answer was going to be.

‘Miss Cox--’

‘It’s still Mrs actually,’ Cox said, cutting off Miles without thinking, that single title sending a flurry of unwelcome thoughts through her mind. ‘Just call me Rachel. Or Cox. Whatever.’

‘Rachel, I’ve looked through all of the information you provided, and I’ve discussed this at length with Henry too, and I’m afraid the conclusion I’ve come to is that I have to turn down your request for Trapeze assistance at this time.’

Now Cox did let out her groan. ‘But Sir, the evidence I--’

‘Well that’s the problem, Cox,’ Flannigan said. ‘There really isn’t much by way of evidence. Assigning the resources of the Trapeze team is a serious and expensive step to take--’

‘Which is why it needs level six approval,’ Miles butted in.

‘... And it’s just not clear that there would be any benefit to your work in doing so at this stage. In fact, it might jeopardise events down the line if we’ve extended our reach without good justification.’

Cox gritted her teeth as she bit back her retort. The way she saw it the term good justification was basically a movable beast that could be placed wherever those at the top end of the hierarchy wanted it. For months her work had seen her edging closer and closer
to the identities and the truth of a group of extremists that she’d colloquially labelled the Thirteen.

After 9/11, Cox was placed on a special investigation to track the activity of family groups of known terrorists. Every year, thousands of children were brought up in extremist jihadi households across the Middle East – it was her job to track those kids to adulthood, and do her best to prevent them from becoming the next wave of terrorists to threaten the region, and ultimately the West. What had begun as an often mind-numbing exercise in basic local surveillance had transformed into something Cox felt held far-reaching significance. It was in Iraq that she’d first come across tales of a group of young boys being trained in a secret and secluded institution, and her work since had led her to believe that those tales – as tall as they often were – held real truth behind them.

Her boss at SIS had agreed, and had sanctioned a formal investigation with Cox’s remit to identify and track down the Thirteen and the facility they were being trained at. Although she firmly believed the notorious Aziz al-Addad was likely one of the key players behind the group, she’d not yet come close to completing her mission. For weeks now it felt as if she’d been hitting brick wall after brick wall. In fact, several months ago, even the few small leads she had dried up overnight. Despite her best efforts she no longer had any active intelligence on where any of the Thirteen were, as though they didn’t even exist anymore. To Cox that meant one thing: bad news. The graduates of destruction were likely now out in the world awaiting activation. Yet the lack of tangible evidence she had as to who the Thirteen were, and where they were, meant the big-wigs at SIS were fast losing interest – and patience – in the investigation.

Cox, on the other hand, remained unmoved in her belief that the Thirteen formed not just a potent potential weapon, but an immediate threat to the UK and
indeed the whole of Western Europe. So far she was having a hard time convincing Flannigan of that.

‘I think you’re wrong,’ Cox said. ‘And I think the longer you delay giving me proper assistance for this investigation the greater the risk to us all.’

Getting access to the Trapeze team - a highly sophisticated surveillance unit operated out of the UK government’s GCHQ - would finally give her the resource she needed to help track down the Thirteen and enable the authorities to stop them. Roger Miles had already turned down a previous request from her some three months ago, and given Flannigan’s attitude towards her of late she was getting to the point where she wondered exactly what influence he had over the decision too. Was he deliberately trying to scupper her work behind her back? But why would he do that?

‘Can you imagine the public reaction if the Thirteen initiate an attack that could have been prevented?’ Cox added.

‘Public reaction?’ Flannigan said. ‘Sorry, but is that a threat?’

‘What do you think? I’m not in this for public recognition, you must know that about me. I simply have to stop this group before it’s too late.’

‘You don’t even know the Thirteen exist!’ Flannigan blasted. ‘For all we’ve seen it’s just your wild personal theory.’

‘That’s ridiculous. Of course they exist, they--’

‘Existed, perhaps. We know very well the recruitment techniques of these jihadi outfits, including those run by the so-called Teacher. And yes, I’m certain there are many young boys who were kidnapped or otherwise forced into training under that vile man. But to suggest there’s some group of thirteen kids who sit above all that, and are about to bring the world to its knees, is just . . . baseless.’

‘According to you.’

‘According to fucking everyone except you actually!’
‘Okay, Henry, let’s keep this level,’ Miles said. ‘Rachel, I know you’ve put a lot of time and sacrifice into this, but the problem is I’m seeing little tangible progress—’

‘That’s because you’re having me operate with my hands tied behind my back!’

‘Enough! Let me be very clear with you. For a while now I’ve tried to see this operation from your point of view, and I’ve given you the benefit of the doubt plenty. But it really is getting to the point now where I have to decide whether continuing this work remains in the public interest.’

‘You have to trust me.’

‘I do. Which is why I’m giving you another two weeks. But if you don’t have any new evidence before then - and I mean real, solid, tangible evidence that we can act upon - then I’m shutting this operation down.’

There was silence for a few seconds and Cox wondered whether they were expecting her to give a response. She didn’t. What could she say to that?

‘Do you understand?’ Flannigan asked.

‘Of course,’ Cox said.

‘Okay, good,’ Miles said. ‘Then I think we’re done for now.’

‘Looks like it, doesn’t it?’ Cox said, before reaching out and ending the call.

She was fuming. Sod them both. If they wouldn’t help her she’d just have to do things her own way. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d broken protocol to prove she was right. The last time she’d been able to dismantle a small cell planning a car bomb attack at the British embassy in Cairo. For her efforts she’d been given a formal reprimand and had her promotion to level four rejected. Yet she firmly believed her actions then were justified, as they were now.

Cox shut the laptop lid and picked the phone back up. She saw there were two missed calls from Subhi, a local asset of hers who officially worked for the Mili-
tary Intelligence Directorate of Syria, though for the last eighteen months had been passing intel to her - payback after she’d helped his mother and grandma escape the war-torn country to Egypt.

He’d left no message - neither text nor voicemail. She was still thinking what to do, how to respond to him, when another call came through.

‘Hi,’ she said, expecting a coded response in return, perhaps a request for them to meet somewhere to discuss whatever he’d so urgently been calling about.

‘Rachel, have you seen the news?’

Cox frowned. ‘The bomb attack?’ she said. She’d heard it on the news but hadn’t paid much attention. Such an attack, although horrific, was becoming par for the course in the beleaguered city. In fact rarely did a day go by without an atrocity of some sort, committed by either one of the many sides in the war. A few hours ago, towards the end of the working day, a lone man had walked through a crowded open-air food market in the centre of the city and blown himself and over twenty other people into pieces.

‘Check the news,’ Subhi said. ‘Then call me back.’

‘Wait,’ Cox said, hoping to stop him before he ended the call. He sounded harried, and she could sense his anxiousness. ‘Are you still there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just tell me.’

Subhi let out a deep sigh. ‘She was there, Rachel. In the market when the bomb went off. I’m sorry, but she’s dead.’

Subhi didn’t need to say anything more than that. Cox slumped. She knew exactly who he meant, and what it meant for her investigation.
CHAPTER 4

Paris, France

Aydin’s first focus as he drove off in the Fiat was simply to leave Paris as quickly as he could, and get some breathing space. He initially headed south, away from where he really wanted to be. He had a phone in his pocket that his people would surely try to trace. He couldn’t keep it on him for long, but he had to at least hope that a simple subterfuge would hold the chasing pack off for a short while.

He drove on for two hours in the clunking Fiat before he stopped at the side of the four-lane highway. He stepped from the car. There were no other vehicles in sight, everything quiet and serene compared to the inner city, and an uncomfortable contrast to the turmoil in his mind and to the chaos that would surely follow him from there.

He dropped the phone to the ground and stomped on it until it was clear the device was smashed beyond reasonable repair. Not dismantled fully, but then he didn’t want it to be. He wanted its pieces to be found. He picked the remnants of the phone back up and flung them into the overgrown verge. No point in making things easy for them.

He didn’t know why but for the next few seconds he just stared off into the dark distance, unable to pull himself away. He thought about Paris. The apartment. Khaled’s bloodied and lifeless body. He wondered how
long it would take for the police to find out about the murder. Was it murder? Two hours into his drive there hadn’t been a single siren or flashing light in sight. Did that mean the police weren’t yet after him?

Or, before they hunted him down, would his own people get to the apartment first and remove the body, cover it all up as if neither he nor Khaled ever existed?

Aydin wasn’t sure which outcome was better or worse.

He wrenched himself from his thoughts and got back into the car. With the bait set, he looped back around Paris, heading north but giving the city a wide berth. It was gone two a.m. by the time he ditched the car in a lay-by four miles from the port of Calais. The thick cloud above stifled the moon’s illumination, and once he was away from the orange glow of the street-lights the surrounding land was pitch black.

That’s where he headed, into the darkness. It sucked him in and he wondered if he’d ever escape it. He traipsed across soggy fields of overgrown grass, using the distant lights from the line of the road a hundred yards to his right to guide him further in.

Even in the darkness the place felt eerily familiar, and before long he saw the first signs of life. Torch-lights. Phone screens. Flickering flames and the wispy smoke of campfires. The hunched forms of sorry people huddled together with nowhere better to go and nothing better to do.

Above the sweet smell of the grassy fields, and the salt from the nearby sea, was the stench of smoke and chargrilled food and festering human waste. All around the people in front of him, past where the eye could see, were a mishmash of tents and plastic tarpaulins stretched over wooden supports, torn metal sheets propped up on poles. Like a holiday campsite gone wrong.

He was in the area known commonly as the Jungle, though the reality didn’t fit that word at all. There was
no dense vegetation, no thriving eco-communities of wondrous beasts. Shitpit was closer to the truth.

A few years ago the Jungle lined the area immediately outside the ferry terminal and Eurotunnel station in Calais. Refugees from Syria and Libya and elsewhere had flocked there hoping for a free ride to the UK. Many had made it to the promised land in those initial waves, but those days were long gone. The much smaller camp was a few miles further back now, but then, the Jungle remained an ever-evolving beast. The French authorities did their best to destroy the hastily erected shantytown at every opportunity, but as quickly as the bulldozers flattened, the people simply set up shop somewhere down the road. They were beyond desperate and simply had nowhere else to go.

But while the location of the masses of people and their hand-built shelters was forever changing, the place and its people remained familiar to Aydin. He’d seen areas like the Jungle countless times all over Europe and beyond.

He knew exactly what he was looking for.

He had his hood pulled up and kept his head down as he squelched through the thick mud underfoot. There’d been no rain that night but the grassy fields that had been taken over by the camp remained churned. As expected, he didn’t get a single glance from the first several groups of people he passed. They felt safer not interacting with the outside world, just sticking in their groups and their imaginary safe bubbles. That wasn’t a problem. It told Aydin they weren’t the ones he was looking for, that they couldn’t help him.

Then he spotted someone who could. The man, standing under the beam of a flashlight, dangling from what looked like a wooden sentry post, was tall and beefy with a shaven head and a thick nose that was squashed to his face. The angle of the light made his deep-set eyes seem like two pools of black. His arms were folded over his chest as he barked at his friend
next to him. The friend was a near carbon copy except he was shorter and slightly thinner, and the way he held his body showed he wasn’t the one in charge. The two men weren’t anything like the others in the camp. Not just in the way they looked, their lighter skin, round faces, high cheekbones, either – typical Slavic features. The biggest difference of all was the lack of desperation and fear. Instead, Aydin saw greed and malice.

The big man looked his way and Aydin quickly darted off to the right, sheltering behind a falling-down wooden hut. The man didn’t see him and turned back to his friend. Aydin was in the shadows, while the man’s face remained well lit by the light above him. Aydin watched the two men for a short while, straining so he could hear their gruff conversation. In the quiet of the night he heard their words clearly, but he couldn’t understand them, their language not one that he spoke or was even familiar with.

Born in England, Aydin still spoke that language with a native, southern accent. His father was from Turkey and had taught him Turkish at home. Through his training at the Farm he’d become proficient in a half-dozen other tongues; Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, Russian, French, German. But these men were speaking something else, a language with a whole host of unfamiliar guttural sounds. Together with their looks, he could only guess they were from Eastern Europe, or perhaps the Balkans, but that could still be one of tens of countries he wasn’t particularly acquainted with.

What he did know was who the men were: gangsters or low-level mafia who’d travelled west and found a home in France for the simply reason of exploiting vulnerable refugees for financial gain.

Aydin quickly put his ill feelings for the scumbags to the side. As much as he detested men like them, he had to see them for what they were: his ticket out of France.
Two weary-looking and scruffily dressed young men walked up to the brutes. There was a quick exchange of words and the big man pointed away into the distance. The two refugees skulked off in that direction. The big man checked his watch once. Then again a minute later. Aydin sensed what was brewing.

Focused on the two men, he was surprised by a young woman emerging from the shadows of the wooden hut he was standing by. She jumped in shock and cupped her mouth with her hand when she saw Aydin standing right there, outside her makeshift home. He lifted a finger to his lips and together with his pleading look managed to avert a shout or scream from her, but the look of panic in her eyes remained.

‘What are you doing?’ she whispered in Arabic, perhaps sensing the need to not raise the alarm. Her accent suggested she was from Syria, as many of the refugees undoubtedly were.

Aydin indicated the two men with his head. The woman understood. He quickly figured she wasn’t a new arrival at the Jungle, her home was too sturdy - comparatively speaking - and the look she gave told him she not only knew the two men, but disliked them just as much as he already did.

‘If they catch you spying--’

He cut her off by holding his hand up.

‘Don’t worry about me,’ he said. ‘You just carry on. I’ll be gone by the time you get back and you’ll never see me again.’

She looked uncertain about that, though he wasn’t sure about which part exactly. After a couple of seconds she moved away, edgily. He turned his head and watched her walking over to one of the groups of people by a fire that was on its last legs, with more smoke than flames. She didn’t look over at him at all - either she was doing her bit to not alert the brutes, or she’d simply already put him out of her mind now that she was back in the safety of her group.
When Aydin turned back he saw the two gangsters were walking away. After waiting a few seconds he followed, hugging the shadows like he was simply part of the darkness. They were soon out of the main Jungle, past the living spaces, just grass and mud as they headed across undulating fields, moving closer to the main road once again.

As Aydin came over the top of a small hill, he peered down into the darkness below. Further away the area was clearly lit up by the lights of the road, but for now the men had disappeared into a crevice between the tarmac and where Aydin was standing and he couldn’t see them at all. He kept moving forward, heading into the blackness behind them, moving cautiously as if he might stumble upon them at any second. Then the clouds above parted, spitting out faint moonlight. Enough for him to understand what he was staring at.

He stopped. He counted twenty-one heads, mostly men, sat or hunched in a group on the soggy ground in front of him. He saw the two gangsters, on their feet, going around the group, one by one, taking the bundles of cash, flitting through the notes and stuffing them into their jackets. He wondered what the price was tonight. A few hundred Euros perhaps. Maybe as much as a couple of thousand. He had nearly ten thousand in his backpack. Not that he was planning on paying these two.

Instead, he crouched down and continued spying the group, looking for a suitable candidate. He spotted two. Young men, sitting at either end of the group, far enough away from the others to show they had no one. They weren’t talking, weren’t looking at anyone else at all. They were loners. Nobody gave a shit about them.

Now all he needed was the opportunity.

He waited for several minutes. The shorter of the gangsters headed off towards the road, probably to wait for the lorry that would take these people to the cherished lands of England. After another ten minutes
passed, one of the refugees got to his feet, spoke a few words to the tall gangster, and headed in Aydin’s direction.

Aydin remained absolutely still as the man came to within five yards of where he was crouching. The man was peering into the darkness all around but there was no indication at all that he knew Aydin was there. He unzipped his trousers and urinated on the ground. He was so perfectly positioned, but Aydin couldn’t take his place. He was certain the woman the man had been sitting next to was his friend, possibly his wife.

Nonetheless Aydin felt his tension rising. He wanted to be out of France by morning. No, he had to be. He needed to be part of that group, and as the man walked away Aydin realised he may have just lost his only opportunity.

Just then, though, as the man reached the group, one of the candidates Aydin had his eye on got to his feet. The tall gangster shouted angrily, but didn’t try to stop him moving away to relieve himself. The man headed off to the left and Aydin snaked round, following his movement until they were just a few yards apart. Aydin glanced around while the man did his business. They were out of sight from the group. He uttered a small prayer of thanks for his good fortune, and another to ask Allah to take care of the man. He wasn’t Aydin’s enemy. The man finished and went to zip up his fly. He didn’t sense Aydin at all as he sprang forward.

Aydin used the heel of his hand to smack down onto the base of the man’s neck - a pressure point of nerves that he knew would cause chaos through his central nervous system. His legs went from under him and Aydin caught his falling body and helped him down to the earth, laying him gently on his side. But his assistance was little to do with him caring for the man’s wellbeing, he simply couldn’t afford to make a sound.

He looked down at the man. He was a similar height and build to Aydin, and about his age. A little
more facial hair, and a straighter, pointier nose perhaps, but it was the middle of the night and Aydin was sure those two gangsters thought every young man who looked even remotely like he was from the Arabian peninsula was indistinguishable.

The man’s trousers were dark, like Aydin’s, and he was wearing a hooded top. His, though, was much lighter-coloured than Aydin’s black one. He quickly stripped his own hoody off and put on the man’s. It fitted just fine.

The man was unconscious, but Aydin didn’t know for how long. He could easily kill him, to reduce his risks of detection, but he didn’t want to be that person. Yet he had to be certain that the man stayed on the ground. So he lifted his foot and drove his heel into the side of the guy’s head. Enough to punish his brain for a few minutes at least, but hopefully not enough to leave him with any lasting damage.

In the distance Aydin heard the hiss of powerful airbrakes. He quickly moved away and over at the roadside he saw the bright beams of light from an articulated lorry. Moments later the second gangster returned and started coralling the group of escapees into shape. Aydin reached the group just in time, fading into the masses, becoming just another anonymous shape in the eyes of the two men in charge.

They did a quick count of heads, not blinking an eye that Aydin was now standing there among the others, rather than the man he’d just left in the mud. But Aydin did feel eyes on him. He glanced to his right and caught the suspicious gaze of an ageing man with a thick wiry beard that must have been nearly white given the way the thin light reflected off it. Aydin held the old man’s stare and his eyes squinted further. Aydin got ready for a challenge. Would the man confront him? Or just go straight ahead and call him out to the gangsters?

Neither. A few seconds later he just looked away without saying anything at all.
The next moment the goons were marching the group towards the waiting lorry. Without further hitch-es, in a few hours Aydin would be back in his country of birth. England.
Dover, England

Aydin spent most of the journey with his eyes closed, though he wasn’t sleeping. Partly he just didn’t want to interact with the group of immigrants that were with him. He wasn’t one of them, not really. The main reason for his unrest, though, was because he was thinking about Nilay and his mother. Thinking of his father too, in fact. Thinking about everything that had happened in his life, imagining the others and what they’d do to punish him now that he’d killed one of his own and broken away.

However unsettling and gruesome those thoughts were, he didn’t regret slitting Khaled’s throat, only that he’d done it without properly thinking through his next steps.

Regardless, he was certain that London had to be his first destination. Nilay’s death had catapulted him onto this course of destruction and he needed to find out what had happened to her and why.

There was little chatter among the group as they sat in the back of the lorry among boxes and pallets. Most of the men and women either slept or stared aimlessly into space for the journey. The trailer was dark and the air was thick with sweat and fear. The only light they had came from two finger-sized torches that a couple of the men had with them. The few people that Aydin saw with mobile phones back in Calais were
ordered to turn them off before the lorry departed and they’d so far kept to that instruction.

Aydin listened to the sounds from outside, trying to decipher where they were on the journey. After the bobbing and swaying of the ferry ride, where one of the women violently vomited into one of the two buckets they’d been provided with for emergency toilet needs, came the most nerve-wracking part. UK Border Force.

With the ferry ride over, car and lorry engines fired up and Aydin could hear other vehicles moving past as they sat waiting, the look of anxiety on the faces of the people around him growing. It took close to half an hour before the lorry engine erupted into life and Aydin was already wondering whether there might be a problem. Finally they began to move, but he could tell from the vibrations and the sounds that the lorry was only crawling, and before long the engine shut down once more.

Aydin heard the driver’s door open and moments later muffled voices outside, just a yard or two from where he was sitting, though the sounds felt distant and removed.

He planned in his mind how he would get away if the boxes in front were peeled away and he was left staring into the faces of the UK Border Force. He had the gun in his trousers, his training and his wits, but that still might not be enough.

The look of worry on the faces of the other passengers grew further as they waited. Then the driver’s door opened and closed again, the engine growled to life, and the wheels began to turn. Moments later the lorry was speeding up and the heave of relief from the people around Aydin was almost overwhelming.

It wasn’t long before chatter grew among the group. Smiles broke out. The men and women probably felt like they’d finally made it, as though their trip through hell was finally over. This was it, a new life. Aydin wouldn’t break it to them that the chances were
their ordeals had only just begun. Who or what awaited them when the lorry reached its destination and those boxes were pulled away, he really didn’t know, but he was sure it wasn’t paradise.

They drove for nearly an hour before the lorry once again stopped. The driver’s door opened. Aydin heard more voices. Then noises as the fabric sides of the lorry were drawn back. Light rays surged into the interior and Aydin had to shut his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them he saw the other men and women squinting, holding hands up to their faces. There was a wall of white light next to them, so bright Aydin couldn’t make out anything of what lay beyond. It reminded him of alien invasion movies he watched with his family as a boy in London. The moment where the spaceship landed and the doors opened and for a minute all that could be seen was light and smoke, before the alien life forms finally appeared.

There were no alien life forms here, though. What Aydin saw coming through the wall of light was much more sinister. White faces, with heavy, furrowed features. If not the actual brothers of the two gangsters in Calais, then certainly close relatives. There were four of them. They shouted at the group in English, though their accents were thick with rolled consonants. None of them appeared to be armed but they immediately instilled fear in the group, hauling people up, pushing and pulling and shoving.

The travellers cowered and did as they were told, filing out of the lorry one after another. Aydin played along, muttering pleadings to the men in Arabic. One of them shoved him in the back and he fell forward, over the edge of the lorry and to the tarmac below. He tried to roll into the fall, but was unable to stop his hip and elbow smacking onto the surface painfully. Before he could recover, another heavily muscled man lifted him back to his feet. He worried for a second that the man would feel the gun. Or maybe that the weapon
had already come loose in the fall. What would the men’s reaction be if they realised Aydin was armed?

He took in the scene around him. The first thing he noticed was the green. It was many years since Aydin was last in England and he’d forgotten just how green it was. The grass, the hedgerows, the trees. They were surrounded by dense emerald colour. And the smell. A fragrant yet earthy scent that tickled his nose - a smell achingly familiar but one that he hadn’t ever thought about until right then.

Aydin saw the lorry was parked on a pothole-covered lane, among farmers’ fields. Across the road were two battered and rusting white vans. Fords he thought. He was shoved back into line, towards the vans where other grunts in jeans and leather jackets were hastily stashing the new arrivals. Just as Aydin expected, these poor people hadn’t just paid for their freedom at all. They’d been conned, and their nightmares had only just begun.

Aydin wouldn’t be part of whatever misery and slavery lay ahead for the others, and no matter how sorry he felt for them, he couldn’t and wouldn’t try to save all twenty of the people he’d travelled with. But he had to save himself.

He let the grunts move him towards the first of the vans as he scoped out the threats around him. He saw there was already a man in the driver’s seat of the van he was heading to. The side door was open. Three sorry faces peered out of the dark interior. Several other immigrants were waiting in line in front of him, soon to join them. He took another shove to the back.

Then leapt into action.

Aydin crouched and swivelled, using his instincts to tell him where the man who just shoved him was standing. His sweeping leg took away one of the man’s, sending the guy off balance. Aydin crashed his forearm down onto the man’s chest, aiding his trip to the blacktop below. He landed on the ground with a thump, and Aydin knew in that moment that for all his tough-guy
bravado and muscle, he didn’t even have basic hand-
to-hand combat training. Prone on the ground, he
should have immediately brought his arms up to defend
his head, neck. He didn’t. Aydin crashed his foot down
onto the man’s windpipe. Unlike in Calais, he had no
care of the extent of damage the blow would cause.
There was a crunching sound and the man’s eyes
bulged, but Aydin didn’t keep his sight on him for even
a second longer to inspect the full damage - he needed
to keep moving.

He darted for the man at the open side door of the
van, who was shepherding travellers into the back. Ay-
din glanced left and right as he moved. The guy in
front was quick to react and peeled from his position,
an angry snarl on his face as he headed for Aydin.
There were shouts and calls all around. Aydin half ex-
pected gunfire to ring out any second. In fact, he found
himself reaching behind for his own weapon as he
watched the hand of the man in front disappear behind
his back. Yet it wasn’t a gun that he pulled, but a hunt-
ing knife. A six-inch serrated blade that Aydin knew
could cause all sorts of damage to the soft tissue of a
human body. As he was about to demonstrate.

Aydin left his gun where it was. There was no need
for it yet. He didn’t have endless supplies of ammuni-
tion so the weapon was a last resort only.

The man shoved the blade towards Aydin, who
shimmied sideways. Still moving forward, he grabbed
the man’s forearm and twisted. He came up behind the
man, still pulling on his arm, his hand close to the
man’s wrist. When the pressure of the twist became
too much, the man released the knife. Aydin let go of
the wrist, grabbed the knife handle and plunged the
blade into the man’s stomach. He let out a gurgling
groan as Aydin withdrew the knife. Blood now covered
his hand. He kicked the man away and he fell into a
heap on the ground.

All around Aydin saw the other men coming forward
for him. They were angry, and intent on doing him
harm, but despite his inferior size there was already a wariness in their eyes, even after just a few seconds of fighting.

Aydin, panting from the rapid exertion of taking down the two big lumps, turned and slid shut the side door of the van, then stepped forward and flung open the driver’s door. The driver had figured out what was happening. He went for his knife, on the passenger seat. Aydin’s eyes lock with his. The driver lifted the knife, but in the confined space he was simply out-positioned. Before the guy could find an angle for a successful attack, Aydin simply grabbed him and roared as he hauled him out of the cab to the ground.

Aydin, his head on fire, was tempted to turn and take on everyone else coming his way. Pull the gun and blast them all down. The release of adrenaline he was experiencing made him feel powerful, almost invincible. Just how they trained him to be under pressure and in the fight.

But he stopped himself. Fighting, beating and punishing those goons wasn’t what he’d come to England for, however much they deserved it, and however good it would make him feel.

He realised it was time to draw his gun, though. As he did so, the sudden sight of the shiny black metal caused everyone honing in on him to reconsider their intentions. He let off a warning shot that cracked into the tarmac just a few inches from the toes of one of the men. He turned and fired off one more shot that caused the front tyre of the second van to explode. He wasn’t in the mood for a car chase.

Not wanting to waste any more bullets than he needed to, he slung his backpack inside then jumped into the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut just as one of the men rushed forward. Aydin pushed down the lock and the man charged into the door, shoulder first. He tried the handle then began angrily pounding on the glass as Aydin searched for the keys. They were in the ignition still. He turned the key and the engine
grumbled to life. Another man was at the front of the van. He held his arms out and put his hands onto the bonnet as he glared defiantly at Aydin.

Their continued machoism surprised him. They’d seen the gun, they’d seen how Aydin fought, but they weren’t giving up. It didn’t worry him, but it did make him wonder just who they were, who they worked for.

He crunched the gearstick into reverse, released the handbrake and thumped on the accelerator. The van lurched back and crashed into the front of the second vehicle. He quickly shoved the gearstick into first. The man at the front remained, as though standing there might stop the getaway. Aydin pushed on the accelerator, just gently at first, giving the man one last chance to see sense.

He didn’t. And when a booming gunshot rang out a second later, Aydin was left with no choice. The driver’s side window exploded into thousands of tiny pieces of glass which filled the cabin around him. He ducked instinctively even though he knew the move was too late. There was no indication of where the bullet landed, but Aydin wasn’t hit.

He couldn’t hang around to figure out where the shot came from, though. He thumped his foot onto the accelerator and the van jerked forward. The man at the front, finally realising his mistake, tried to dive to the side at the last moment. He didn’t quite manage it, and there was a loud thud and the van jumped up as it raced over his body. Whether it was just his legs Aydin had crushed or worse he didn’t know, and he didn’t care.

The only thing that mattered was that he was tearing away, and as he looked into the side mirror and saw the men and their vehicles fading into the distance, he knew he was in the clear.
Ismail Obbadi sat alone on a park bench, surrounded by an endless sprawl of discoloured communist-era apartment blocks. As the early morning commuter traffic bustled around him in the crowded district of Lichtenberg, Obbadi was almost entirely ignored by passers-by - just another anonymous face in another decrepit cesspit.

As strange as it might seem to many, it was a pleasing change of scenery and circumstance for Obbadi, given his more public image of late. Obbadi had dressed down for the occasion too, sporting battered old shoes, a pair of jeans and black cotton jumper rather than his more usual and more formal designer gear. His hair was unkempt and covered by a blue baseball cap and he hadn’t shaved for nearly forty-eight hours. His appearance was far from his immaculate norm, yet he didn’t feel at all scruffy - he felt powerful, knowing he could so easily assume different personas, and blend in to different surroundings so seamlessly.

He felt his phone vibrating in his pocket. He lifted it out and stared at the screen. It was a Skype call. He recognised the caller ID. It was far from ideal to have to speak like this, but under the circumstances he wanted to hear what his brother had to say.

‘Yes?’ Obbadi said, answering the call.
‘He got out, in the middle of the night we think. But we’ll catch up with him.’
‘How did you let him get away? You told me you were tracking?’
‘I said it felt wrong that he’d been so careless. I warned you it was a trick.’
‘You did. And I insisted you made sure. But you still shouldn’t have been that far behind.’
‘I’m sorry. What do you want me to do?’
‘Go back to your position. I’ll get your brothers to pick up the trail.’

Obbadi ended the call before either of them said too much. Seconds later, still grinding his teeth as he thought about the previous night’s events, he spotted the young man – short and squat – heading his way. His face was covered in a thick black beard and he wore a taqiyah skullcap. It pleased Obbadi to see the man’s traditional and more conservative attire, though with his brown jacket unzipped Obbadi could see his gut was much flabbier than when they’d last seen each other. Perhaps he’d become too used to a life of relative freedom in Western Europe. Or was it just that he wasn’t responsible enough to have kept himself in shape now that the elders weren’t there to look after him day in, day out?

‘It’s good to see you, brother,’ the man said as he sat down next to Obbadi, a relaxed smile on his face.
‘You too, Sab’ah.’ Number seven.
‘I’m sure my home here isn’t as grand as yours,’ Sab’ah said, indicating the grim housing blocks in front of them.

‘Brother, we may live in different places now, but there is only one place that either of us will ever know as home.’

‘True. I still think of the Farm every day. Do you?’
‘That place changed our lives, yet I’d be lying if I said it was somewhere I’d ever want to return to.’
Sab’ah laughed. ‘I think I know what you mean. Did you know I was actually born in this city? Germany is my home country. I lived in Berlin for six years. Until . . .’ Sab’ah bowed his head. ‘Until my mama died.’

Obbadi didn’t offer any response to that, though he was far from pleased with the clear sorrow that he sensed in his brother as he recalled his former life. That was behaviour that certainly would never have been tolerated at the Farm. The West was so quick to destroy the weak, though Obbadi was surprised to include Sab’ah, usually so headstrong, in that bracket. He’d have to think carefully about whether to report this to their Father. Perhaps he should just give Sab’ah the benefit of the doubt this one time. If he completed the tasks Obbadi had come here for, it would surely prove his brother remained capable and ready.

Sab’ah’s face turned sour. ‘I heard about Talatashar.’

Obbadi clenched his fists in anger. He was still reeling about what had happened in Paris. ‘Heard what, exactly?’

‘That he’s gone. He left us.’

‘Nobody leaves,’ Obbadi said, feeling anger sticking in his throat. ‘We’ll find him, and he’ll suffer for what he’s done.’

‘He deserves nothing more than what’s coming. I’ll help in any way I can. I’ll kill him myself if I have to. You just need to say.’ Sab’ah’s eyes narrowed. ‘Is that why you’re here early?’

‘No, it’s not. I don’t want anyone else moving from position now. Talatashar isn’t in Germany. If he does come here, then I will seek your help. But right now, we stick to our plan.’

‘Understood,’ Sab’ah said with a determined and resolute look on his face. ‘How long will you be here?’ he asked. ‘I’m sure you wouldn’t want to stay with me, perhaps a hotel? There would be many to suit your taste here.’
‘I’m not staying. I’ll be flying out of Germany before tomorrow. Is everything ready?’

‘Of course. The van is round the corner. Are we going now?’

Obbadi looked at his watch. ‘Very soon. But first, I have something else to discuss with you.’

Obbadi saw the questioning look in his brother’s eyes. He reached into his jacket pocket. It came out clutching a rolled piece of paper wrapped around a small cylindrical object. He passed it to Sab’ah. Looking confused, Sab’ah unwrapped the paper - a black-and-white photograph - to reveal a small vial.

‘Do you know who that is?’ Obbadi asked.

‘Yes, but—’

‘Not buts. No questions. Do you know who he is?’

‘I do.’

‘Can you get to him?’

‘I’ll find a way.’

‘And you know what that is?’

‘I think so.’

‘Always wear gloves. My advice is to put the liquid into a sprayer. Get it into his face - his mouth, his nose. Once it’s in his circulation he’ll be dead within minutes.’

‘But I don’t understand. Why this? Why now?’

Obbadi looked at Sab’ah, but said absolutely nothing. Eventually Sab’ah got the message - no questions - and just looked down to his lap. He folded the photograph back around the vial and stuffed both inside his jacket pocket.

‘You should come and see where I live,’ Sab’ah said. ‘We’ve fresh food, you must be hungry. We can show you our work, make sure everything is to your satisfaction.’

‘That won’t be necessary. And there isn’t time. Just make sure this happens before the week is over. Can you do that?’

‘I’ll do anything for you. For the others.’

‘I know you will. Okay, then let’s get going.’
Obbadi got to his feet and Sab’ah followed suit. Obbadi reached out and put his arms around his brother, slapping his back and squeezing him tightly.

‘Are you ready for this?’ Obbadi said.
‘You shouldn’t have to ask.’
‘Of course,’ Obbadi said. He half-turned, making to go away, but then stopped.
‘Oh, and brother?’
‘Yes?’
‘If I ever hear you talking about your childhood like that again, then I’ll kill you myself.’

The colour washed from Sab’ah’s face. ‘I understand,’ he said.
‘Good. Then let’s get this done.’
Obbadi sat in the passenger seat, looking out of his window as Sab’ah drove the van through central Berlin, heading west from Lichtenberg. They were soon passing the Brandenburg gates, then out of the window Obbadi caught a glimpse of the looming Reichstag with its lofty domed roof, moments before they headed onto the wide highway that bisected the dense green of the sprawling Tiergarten. Obbadi realised he was smiling to himself as they passed the famous sights. He’d been to Berlin many times before. He found the history of the city intoxicating, and could dwell in his mind for hours imagining what it must have been like to live there - anywhere in Europe really - through the Nazi regime, World War II and the Holocaust.

It was certainly ironic, almost fitting, that it was in Berlin of all places that Obbadi now found himself on this mission.

‘Are you sure this will work?’ Sab’ah said. ‘You don’t want to take the weapons in there with us?’

‘Of course it will work.’

They had two Glock handguns in the back of the van, a G36 assault rifle, plus all of the other equipment they needed. But they’d go into the meeting empty-handed. It was the best way.

‘And what if they decide to just kill us the moment we walk in?’ Sab’ah asked, still not sounding convinced at the plan.

‘Do you really think they could?’
Obbadi focused hard on his brother’s features as he waited for an answer, looking for any tell, any sign of weakness. He saw none. That was good.

They’d soon made it out of Tiergarten and after several minutes of driving past the grand upscale buildings of West Berlin, apartment blocks with wrought iron balconies and stone-arched entranceways, they were heading into the industrial periphery of the city. They drove past various forms of office and warehouse, new and old, brick and stone and corrugated metal.

‘This is the one,’ Obbadi eventually said, stooping low so he could look up at the huge red brick structure that rose up from weed-filled grounds behind a rusted chain-link fence. ‘Go in there.’

Sab’ah nodded and pulled the van off the deserted road and through what was likely once a car park but was now a pothole-ridden expanse of four-foot-high plant life. The greenery crunched under the wheels of the van. Obbadi spotted the two parked vehicles in a small clearing by a side entrance to the building. One of the vehicles was a luxury black BMW X5, the other a black Mercedes van - similar to the one they were in, but in much better condition. There were two men standing by the vehicles. Both white-skinned and burly, shaved heads, wearing jeans and leather jackets. Both were armed with assault rifles.

‘Park next to the van,’ Obbadi said.

Sab’ah did so and moments later they were both stepping from their vehicle. Obbadi caught the eyes of the men, the shorter, older one seemed to be the one in charge, by the way he stepped forward.

‘No weapons,’ he said with obvious distaste for the new arrivals, speaking in his native German, a language Obbadi spoke fluently.

Obbadi raised his arms in the air. ‘We’re not that stupid,’ Obbadi said, calm, accommodating, friendly. ‘But you can check us if you want to.’

The man looked slightly put off by Obbadi’s coolness, though the hostility in his expression remained
clear. These men were not natural allies of Obbadi’s. They certainly didn’t believe in the cause. In fact they were most likely vehemently opposed to it. But this was a business transaction.

The short man nodded to his friend who came forward and quickly patted down both Obbadi and Sab’ah. He didn’t do a very good job. He nodded back to his boss.

‘They’re inside.’

Obbadi smiled then walked towards the large double doors, Sab’ah striding along with him.

‘What about the equipment?’ Sab’ah said.

‘Not yet, my friend. Just follow my lead.’

They entered the building, an old textile factory built in the 1930s, and found themselves in a gigantic open space with bashed up wooden floors, paint-peeling metal struts and boarded-up windows that let through only slivers of light. Even though it was dark and gloomy, the air musty with a heavy stench of wood oil, it was clear there was no one there.

‘Next floor up then,’ Obbadi said, spying the metal spiral staircase in the near corner of the room.

‘Are you sure about this?’

‘Sab’ah, if you haven’t got anything useful to say, then can I suggest you say nothing at all.’

Obbadi set off for the stairs and started up them without another word between him and his brother. The staircase swayed and rattled with each step he took. Obbadi soon found himself emerging into a near-identical space to the one they’d just come from. Nearly identical, except for two big differences. First was that several of the boards covering the windows had been removed, meaning the space was light and airy. Secondly the space wasn’t empty. There were four men, crowded around a makeshift table, in the centre of the floor.

Obbadi beamed a genuine smile - at least it looked genuine enough.
‘Herr Streicher,’ Obbadi said, outstretching his hand as he moved towards the disgusting fat blob of a man who stood, arms folded, at the head of the others.

Streicher, large round blue eyes that matched his overall rounded appearance, glared suspiciously, then uncurled his arms and gave Obbadi’s hand a crushing shake. Despite his obvious confidence and self-satisfaction, Streicher’s azure eyes were strangely dull, his rosy-red cheeks and sagging chin further adding to his dishevelled appearance. He was wearing casual clothes, a tight white shirt that was buttoned up to the neck, but Obbadi could still see the black of tattoo ink poking out of the top. Probably an SS insignia or a swastika, such was the lack of originality of men like this. In fact, Obbadi could see the other three men had similar swirls of ink creeping up their necks and one very clearly had a small SS symbol tattooed on his left temple. Another had teardrops inked under one eye. Obbadi resisted the urge to roll his eyes at these sad specimens.

‘You’re travelling light for a man who’s supposed to have fifty barrels of Uragan D2 for me,’ Obbadi said as he looked beyond Streicher to the table where he could see just two large metal canisters. Uragan D2 was written in big red letters on a white label across each of the containers, right next to various warning signs as to the contents’ potency.

Streicher shrugged. ‘And you’re travelling very light for a man who’s bringing me two million dollars,’ he said, his guttural voice croaky. He folded his arms again and Obbadi saw his minions tense up. Each of them had weapons in their hands, though they were holding them casually.

‘The wonders of modern technology,’ Obbadi said. ‘Your money is a click away. As agreed.’

‘And your Uragan D2 is a few metres away,’ Streicher said, which Obbadi took to mean it was in the van downstairs. Streicher glanced at the table, then back
to Obbadi. ‘This is just a sample. You want the rest, I need the money first.’

‘I guess that’s fair. But we need to test the material before we can pay you. I’m not handing over two millions dollars only to find you’ve given us slug pellets.’

‘Is that some sort of joke?’ Streicher said. ‘How the fuck are you going to test the material here?’

‘Why would it be a joke? We have the equipment, in the van. It’ll be perfectly safe.’

Obbadi turned to Sab’ah, about to give him the instruction to head back to the van, but Streicher soon stopped that.

‘No,’ he said, his voice raised enough to grab the attention of everyone in the room. ‘You pay, otherwise you and your rag-head friend will leave this building in pieces. And you can be sure we’ll take as many of those pieces while you’re still breathing as we can.’

Obbadi stared at the man for a few moments. The animosity seeping through the big man’s every pore was unmistakable. Quite simply, Obbadi felt exactly the same way about each of the revolting excuses for men in front of him. It was one of the reasons Streicher and his crew were the perfect source. Who would ever believe that these neo-Nazi thugs would be suppliers to the likes of Obbadi? Yet this was strictly a one-time-only transaction. Obbadi had hoped there might be a way to not pay. Perhaps it was easier to get the deal sorted quickly.

He reached into his jeans pocket. Two of Streicher’s men hauled up their weapons. Obbadi, not hiding his annoyance, pulled his empty hands into the air.

‘I’m reaching for my phone you morons,’ he said. ‘You want your money, I need my phone to wire it.’

Streicher thought for a moment then nodded. His men left the guns pointed at Obbadi but relaxed in their stances. Obbadi took the phone out and with his eyes flitting between the gun barrels and Streicher and
his phone screen he went through the process of transferring the money.

‘Two million dollars, sitting in a Grand Cayman bank account, just for you,’ Obbadi said, showing the screen to Streicher briefly before stuffing the phone back into his pocket. ‘I expect your accountant will call any second to confirm.’

Sure enough moments later there was a shrill ringing and Streicher picked his phone up from the table. He didn’t say a word. Just listened with the phone pressed up against his ear, before putting the device back down again.

‘You’re happy?’ Obbadi asked.

‘I’ve been worse.’

Obbadi turned to Sab’ah. ‘Go and fetch the equipment.’

Sab’ah nodded then scurried off, and Obbadi listened as his brother headed down the stairs and across the wood floor below to the outside. He kept his eyes on Streicher who held his gaze.

‘Quite something to be working with a man like you,’ Streicher said.

‘Capitalism knows no bounds,’ Obbadi said. ‘I’m only surprised that it’s in Germany that we had to come for this. I’d have thought given history that this would be the hardest place on earth to find the infamous Zyklon B.’

Streicher twitched at the name. Obbadi wondered whether the Nazi Holocaust was a source of pride for men like these, or of embarrassment and shame.

The world over people knew of the notoriety of Zyklon B, the brand name of the cyanide pellets used to kill millions of Jews in the concentration camps in Poland during World War II. What few realised was that the substance had originally been developed as a pesticide, and hydrogen cyanide was still produced for industrial use all over the world in various forms, under various different brand names. Finding it packaged in pellet format was difficult, and finding a supply that
wouldn’t get radars bleeping was even harder. Hence
the lofty price tag. But two million dollars was well
worth it, as far as Obbadi was concerned.

Obbadi heard the doors of the van open outside,
then moments later they were slammed shut again.

This was it.

He saw Streicher’s eyes twitch. Did he know? It re-
ally didn’t matter now.

There was a double-tap of suppressed gunfire out-
side as Sab’ah took out the two sentries. Streicher was
surprisingly quick to realise something wasn’t right. But
not quick enough.

Obbadi lifted his arm and raced for the nearest of
the guards. The hidden blade shot out from under his
sleeve and Obbadi stepped behind the man for cover
and drove the knife into the man’s neck. The other two
men began firing their weapons but they had no clear
shot of Obbadi, and he reached forward and grabbed
hold of the rifle the man was still clutching and with
four quick pulls he fired off enough shots to put the
other two men on the ground. Down, but not out. He
needed them alive.

He drew the knife from the man’s neck and pulled
the rifle off his shoulder and let him slump to the
ground. Obbadi twisted the rifle to Streicher who’d had
just enough time to grab his concealed weapon and aim
it at Obbadi’s head. But it was a stalemate and neither
man fired.

‘You forgot about the man behind you, though,’
Obbadi said, looking beyond Streicher to the head of
the stairs where Sab’ah was standing with the G36.

Streicher whipped his head round and Obbadi
lunged forward and swiped the butt of the assault rifle
across the back of the big man’s head. He keeled over.

Ten minutes later Streicher and his two still alive
accomplices were roped together in the back of Sab’ah’s van.
'You have no idea what you’ve done,' Streicher said, still defiant. He spat out a mouthful of blood. ‘You, your whole family. I’ll find them, I’ll skin you all alive.’

Obbadi, who was standing by the open back doors of the van, busy pulling on large industrial rubber gloves, stopped and pondered that for a second.

‘I’m wondering,’ Obbadi said. ‘Is it just bravado when you say things like that, or do you really think you’re capable of such an act?’

Streicher fumed, but said nothing.

‘I ask because it’s an easy thing to say.’ Obbadi reached for the hunting knife that he’d pilfered from one of Streicher’s men and held the blade out towards Streicher. ‘But actually cutting into someone, then taking the skin and peeling it from their body as they writhe and scream . . . that’s not such an easy thing to do. What do you think, Sab’ah?’

‘No, not for me, brother,’ Sab’ah said head down. Obbadi shook his head and pursed his lips. ‘See? And he knows what it’s like. He’s seen me do it.’

Streicher was now looking less confident than he had done moments before. Obbadi smiled.

‘Brother, it’s time. We really do need to do the test before we can conclude this deal.’

‘Right away.’

Both Sab’ah and Obbadi grabbed the heavy-duty gas masks and pulled them over their heads. Streicher’s face still had a certain amount of resolve remaining but the intermittent flickers of fear were becoming more frequent and lasting longer.

‘Okay, we’re ready,’ Sab’ah said, plonking down one of the canisters from the warehouse onto the floor of the van, right by Streicher’s feet.

Obbadi and Sab’ah climbed into the back of the van and pulled shut the doors. Obbadi took the knife and held it up in the air, the blade pointing down to the floor.
‘I’ve long wanted to see exactly how this works,’ he said, grinning in anticipation as he locked eyes with Streicher. ‘I hope I won’t be disappointed.’

He plunged the knife down into the lid of the metal drum and then sawed around the rim to remove a crude circle of metal. Behind the plastic that covered his face his eyes opened wide as he stared down at the off-white pellets inside that looked completely innocuous. He wondered what would happen next. Would they fizz or froth or let off smoke as they reacted with the air and spat out their poison? Or would they just sit there looking inert despite their deadly nature?

After thirty seconds Obbadi, his eyes flicking from the pellets over to the three shackled men, realised it was the latter. There was no indication whatsoever that those little white pellets were filling the van with hydrogen cyanide gas, yet he could tell from the faces of the three men that the poison was already taking control.

Obbadi watched with rabid interest. As the gas reached the men’s lungs they choked and gagged, the panic in their eyes growing by the second. The men moaned, then screamed as the cyanide rapidly worked through their bodies, blocking oxygen from muscles and organs. Soon they were convulsing. Frothy white and red spittle dripped from Streicher’s mouth. A line of blood dribbled out from the ear of one of his men. The other, the more alert of the three now, was screaming louder and louder. With his body shaking and spasming he slammed his head against the side of the van like a crazed beast, the vehicle shaking on its suspension. Obbadi winced with each strike and after several self-inflicted blows the blotch of red on the side of the van grew. Obbadi let out an amused laugh and looked away from the maniac over to Sab’ah. His face was hard and emotionless. He gave a slight nod to Obbadi.

‘I think it works,’ Obbadi said.

Sab’ah said nothing. Obbadi looked back at the men. Streicher’s head was now bowed, but his body
still twitched violently. The lack of oxygen to his brain had rendered him unconscious but his muscles were cramping severely making his whole body shake. Could he still feel the pain? Obbadi hoped so.

It was several minutes more before the three men were still. By that point their skin was an unnatural pink colour and was covered in bright red and in some places greenish spots.

Obbadi moved over and lifted up Streicher’s head. Blood was dripping from both of his eyes. There was no doubt he was dead. Obbadi let go and the head flopped down.

‘It’s done,’ he said, his face now deadpan as he turned to Sab’ah.

Obbadi reached out and opened the van doors and stepped outside. He removed the mask and took in a lungful of fresh air. Sab’ah joined him.

‘You’re satisfied?’ Sab’ah asked.

‘More than satisfied,’ Obbadi said. He looked over to the black Mercedes van. ‘I’ll take the rest of the barrels now.’

Sab’ah looked unsure about that. ‘How will you get out of the country?’

Obbadi scowled at his brother. ‘You let me worry about that. Put all the bodies in your van. All of the equipment too. Then burn it. Make sure there’s nothing left.’

‘I’ll do it right away.’

Obbadi reached over and put his hand on Sab’ah’s shoulder, then pulled his brother over and hugged him tightly.

‘We’re almost there now,’ Obbadi said. ‘I only wish you could have stayed longer.’

‘Next time, I promise.’

Obbadi let go and took a half-step away. ‘Ma’a salama,’ Sab’ah said.

Obbadi turned and smiled. ‘And may peace be upon you too, my brother.’
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Rob Sinclair
‘Were you ever happy?’ she asked.
‘Of course,’ I said.
‘And what made you happy?’
‘Lots of things. It depends what point in my life you’re asking about. I was a happy kid, certainly - my upbringing wasn’t particularly hard or painful.’
‘And what about in your adult life?’
‘Alice made me happy.’
‘Always?’
‘No, not always. We were together for twelve years; we had ups and downs like everyone else. But in the early days, before marriage and mortgages and children and ... complications, our relationship was perfect.’
‘And since Alice?’
‘Since Alice? Since Alice I’ve never been the same.’
‘You mean you’ve never been that happy again?’
‘No. Not like I was back then.’
‘What would that person, the old you, think of you now? What would he say if he were to meet you?’
‘He wouldn’t recognise me. We’re such different people. But then I could never have foreseen that my life would turn out like this. I could never have imagined that one day in our home, in our bed, I would find Alice murdered.’
'What’s two plus two plus two plus two?’ Harry said.
‘Two!’ Chloe blurted out.
‘No, idiot.’
‘Harry, be nice,’ I said. Chloe gave her brother a withering look.
‘Come on, Dad, what is it?’ Harry said as he skipped a few steps in front of me. Chloe was by my side, her tiny hand snug inside mine.
‘Eight,’ I said.
It took Harry a few moments to determine whether I was indeed correct.
‘Yes!’ he finally said. ‘Okay. So what’s a million and a million billion thousand?’
‘A lot,’ I said.
‘No!’
‘Yes, it is,’ I said.
‘Is,’ echoed Chloe.
‘A lot isn’t a number, Dad. Play properly.’
‘Okay, what was the question again?’
‘I can’t remember.’
‘Two!’ Chloe blurted out again.
‘Chloe!’ Harry said in disgust.
‘My turn then,’ I said. ‘If I have three pounds and an ice-cream costs one pound, how many ice-creams will each of us have?’
‘Ice-cream!’ Chloe said.
Harry snorted. ‘That’s too easy.’
‘What is it then?’
‘One.’
‘No. You’ll have none. ’Cos I’m eating them all! Unless you beat me to the ice-cream van.’

With that, Harry and Chloe both screamed in delight. Harry burst off at pace through the park gates and toward the van a couple of hundred yards ahead. Chloe let go of my hand and started running – more like shimmying really – after her big brother. After a few paces, though, she stopped and pouted.
‘He beat me,’ she said sulkily.
‘Keep going - you only have to beat me!’

With renewed impetus she set off again. I couldn’t help but beam as I watched my kids dashing away, not a care in the world except for making sure they got an ice-cream. The innocence of youth truly is wonderfully blinkered. It’s infectious too. Spending time with my children, especially impromptu time, was like a drug, making me forget – at least temporarily – the many troubles in my life. And I really needed the respite.

Usually our childminder, Mary, who I thought was a sweet and caring woman but who the kids thought was old and boring, would pick the children up after school on a Monday. Not today, though. It might have been October, but the weather was balmy and sunny (though to be honest, even if it had been minus ten out the kids wouldn’t have said no to ice-cream in the park). And I’d had a crappy week … scratch that, I’d had a shitty month, and Harry and Chloe were as ever the perfect pick-me-up.

Not that they were a breeze to look after - what kids are? At eight going on eighteen, Harry was far too smart for his own good, and had little patience for his three-year-old sister. Put them together for more than a few minutes and there was bound to be an incident of some sort. Harry, being the eldest and the biggest, tormented his sister like crazy, but she was slowly starting to show her own cunning too. Within a few years she’d be able to give him a run for his money, for sure.
With me in a blinkered state of relaxation, the three of us sat down on a bench to tuck into our treats. Needless to say, Chloe somehow managed to smear sticky ice-cream all over her pretty pink dress - not that she batted an eyelid. Harry chose a hideous blue ice-lolly that, he showed us proudly, turned his tongue, teeth and lips a vibrant blue. Simple pleasures.

And then they were off again, hurtling around the grass emitting spates of giggles and the occasional disgruntled shout, Chloe chasing but never quite catching her brother.

As the time edged toward six I decided we should head back to the house. My wife, Gemma, would be home and wondering where we all were. We set off side by side, all three of us seemingly content. And yet, as we walked toward the park exit, I felt like I was walking from one life into another. Back to reality.

That gloomy feeling was further cemented when I saw the black Range Rover pulled up outside the park gates. As we approached, its engine thundered to life. By that point I could feel my heart heaving in my chest.

They wouldn’t have come here, would they? When I’m with my kids?

A mixture of fear and disgust filled me. I stared at the blackened windows, unable to see anything of who sat inside - although I knew full well to whom the car belonged.

We were almost adjacent when the Range Rover began crawling away. Then, after a few seconds, the driver put his foot down and the engine roared as it propelled the heavy vehicle away at pace. I watched as the car sped down the road ... toward the turn for our street.

I held my breath. The car slowed. Its brake lights blinked once. Twice.

No, please, don’t, I willed. Not my home.

But at the last moment the car revved again and shot off into the distance. Soon it was out of sight. I
felt my body loosen as a wave of tension was suddenly released.

‘Dad?’ Harry said.

I turned to face him, trying to regain my composure, but he must have seen the look on my face. He indicated to Chloe, and I looked down. Her face was creased and upset. I was grasping her hand, I realised, squeezing it as tightly as I could. I hadn’t even noticed, hadn’t heard her murmurs. I’d been too consumed by my own world. My own problems.

I let go and saw the mangled form of Chloe’s hand quickly regain its normal shape.

‘Honey, I’m so sorry,’ I said to her. ‘Did I hurt your hand?’

Chloe, bottom lip protruding, just nodded.

‘Dad, is everything okay?’ Harry said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Everything’s fine. Let’s get home and see Mum.’

I hated lying. I especially hated lying to my children. But what else was I supposed to say? I had to shield them from harm. That’s what a father does. And if that meant shielding them from the truth, then so be it.

Sooner or later, though, I knew something would have to give. And as we headed for home, my instincts whispered that it was going to be sooner.
I didn’t get the nightmare often, not anymore, just once every few months. In the past, in the early days, it had come every night. People say that time is a great healer. I’m not sure I felt healed through the passage of time, but it at least created a certain detachment and distance that grew as the days, weeks, months and years went by. Yet when the nightmare came, it was still as powerful and real as the very first time, still able to shake every bit of confidence and resolve from my battered mind.

The nightmare was a single frame, a moment frozen in time - a memory I’d tried over the years to bury deep in my mind but that still tormented me. Nothing could ever have prepared me for seeing Alice - my wife, the love of my life - like that. Her lithe, naked body draped over the sheets of our king-sized bed. The rings of red on her neck from the killer’s hands scorched onto her delicate skin. Her wide open eyes, all life drained from them, staring up at me, pleading for my help.

In the nightmare I couldn’t speak, couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. I was entirely frozen, powerless, just as she was. Just as I had been in the moment seven years ago when I’d first looked down at Alice’s lifeless body.

My eyes shot wide open and my head jumped up off the pillow as I escaped the horror of the flashback. After a few seconds, I realised where I was and a sense of
relief washed over me. I looked over at the bedside
clock: seven twenty-five a.m. The alarm would be go-
ing off in five minutes.

A groan from the other side of the bed.
‘Ben? What time is it?’ Gemma murmured.
‘Almost time to get up,’ I said, looking over at her.
Her light-brown hair was crumpled and messy and strewn over her face. She gave a half-smile. Not a warm, happy smile. More a grimace at having been dis-
turbed.
‘I’d best get ready,’ she mumbled, then got up from the bed and headed to the en-suite bathroom.

She slipped off her nightie as she walked and I watched her, the way her hips rocked gently, sexily, remembering how that teasing saunter had first drawn me to her. I was still hugely attracted to Gemma - how could I not be? Staring at her toned, naked body, I felt arousal bubbling every time. But our relationship was far from rosy. In my late thirties, I certainly wasn’t over the hill, not by a long stretch, yet lust and passion were becoming forgotten. It wasn’t that I still expect-
ed Gemma to be tearing my clothes off every night, but her interest in me was cooling by the day.

Cooling? No, it was damn near frozen already. Not that Gemma was entirely to blame for that.
‘Daddy?’ came the tiniest of voices from the bed-
room doorway. Chloe. ‘Is it up time?’

Chloe was the most kind and caring little person, in many ways a true mirror image of her mother. Whatev-
er my struggles to keep the fires of passion burning with Gemma, one thing I knew for sure was that she was a great mother.

‘Yes, sweetie,’ I said. ‘Go and wake your brother.’

I waited for Gemma to finish in the bathroom. She came out looking fresher and brighter - awake. She gave me the faintest of smiles as we silently walked past each other. I took my time in the shower, then dressed in a pair of jeans and a blue hooded sweat-
shirt. By the time I got downstairs, Gemma and the
kids were sitting around the kitchen table munching cereal.

‘Are you going to work today at all?’ Gemma asked, her tone unsympathetic.

‘Probably not.’

Gemma tried her best to hide her eye roll. Or at least I gave her the benefit of the doubt on that; maybe she’d intended for me to see it.

‘You’re not taking Harry out of school again, are you?’ she queried.

‘Again? It’s only a couple of times a year.’

‘You think?’

‘You know it is.’

‘Well, sure, the trips down to that wretched place may be a couple of times a year, but what about the rest of it? This moping around of yours is getting worse, and dragging the kids into it with you isn’t helping anyone.’

‘This isn’t the time or the place,’ I said, scowling and looking over at the kids, who were busy pretending not to be there.

Gemma blushed, ashamed. She was right, though. Gemma and I had had various ups and downs over the years and I knew she’d been a lifeline to me after Alice’s death. But recently the weight of the world was bearing down on me once more. I loved them, all three of them, I really did. Whatever problems I had, the last thing I wanted was to bring Gemma and the kids down with me. I needed them.

‘It’ll get better again,’ I said, reaching out and putting my hand on Gemma’s. ‘I promise.’

I wanted my words to be true, not just a desperate hope. Gemma smiled at me, but the look she gave told me she saw the doubt in my eyes. She whipped her hand away.

‘He’s not going with you,’ Gemma said. ‘Come on, Ben, he’s eight years old. He needs to be at school with his friends. The cemetery is no place for kids, you know that.’
I looked over at Harry, who was staring sheepishly at Gemma. He turned toward me.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ he said. ‘I should go to school.’

I felt my heart sink, not necessarily at his words or their meaning, but at knowing that Gemma had swayed my own son against me.

Really, though, was Harry wanting to go to school rather than accompany me to a cemetery the worst thing in the world? Probably not. I wanted the best for the kids. I wanted them to grow up in a stable and happy home. I’d worked hard over the years to make sure that was the case. We weren’t the perfect family but then what family is? I was doing the best I could under the circumstances.

Still, I felt a duty to do right by Alice too. I owed it to her. And it wasn’t that much to ask of Harry, or Gemma.

I could feel my anger building. I wanted to retort and remind Gemma that Harry was my son, not hers ... but I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. Doing so wouldn’t change either of their decisions. And there was no need to stick a dagger in Gemma’s heart like that. Alice may have been Harry’s biological mother, but it was Gemma who’d looked after him for the last six, nearly seven years, who’d washed him, fed him. She was there when he learned to walk, when he spoke his first word. She helped to teach him to read and write. She was Harry’s mother.

I stared at Gemma for a good while but said nothing. Her expression remained hard and defiant.

I looked over at Harry. His head was bowed.

‘You can come if you want,’ I said to him. ‘I’ll make sure school understands.’

‘He’s not going with you!’ Gemma said.

Harry just gently shook his head.

I got up from the table and gave both of the kids a kiss on their forehead. Then I moved up to Gemma and kissed her softly on the cheek.

‘I love you,’ I said.
Gemma said nothing in return. Without another word spoken, I turned and headed for the door.
CHAPTER 3

Fitting for the occasion, the weather was best described as utter shit. It was October. It was dark, gloomy, windy. It wasn’t pelting down with rain but the air was filled with dampness. And misery.

I’d ridden around aimlessly for hours - it just didn’t feel right, Harry not being with me. It was nearly mid-day by the time I built up the courage to head to the cemetery on the outskirts of Sutton Coldfield, the town where we lived, just a few miles north of Birmingham.

I parked my motorbike in one of the few spaces near the central chapel, took off my helmet, and then forced my way against the biting wind over to where Alice’s remains were buried. By the time I reached the plot water was dripping from my hair, and even though my leathers were keeping the heavy drizzle off my body, I was shivering vigorously. I took off my backpack and pulled out the bunch of fresh flowers I’d picked up from a local florist on the way. Next I took out a picture of Harry, taken on our recent holiday to Spain.

Harry had been a little over twelve months old when Alice was killed. He couldn’t really remember her, I was sure of that. I could tell he held a fondness for her, though, a false memory if you like, built up from us looking at pictures of them together and the stories I told him about Alice. He probably imagined himself in those pictures, the familiarity tricking his brain to the point where he really believed he could
remember being there. Memory is a funny thing. It feels reliable and absolute, though it’s anything but.

I was upset that Harry wasn’t with me, but I knew he had his own life to lead, and I knew deep down that Gemma was only looking out for Harry’s best interests. She was his mother now. In all the years that had passed I hadn’t been able to let go of Alice, of what had happened to her or of the impact of her death on me. Maybe it wasn’t a bad thing if Harry could.

As I stared at the picture in my hand, my brain took me back to the day Harry was born. I’m not sure I’ve ever had a day with so many ups and downs. Alice had been nearly eight months pregnant. We had been visiting her parents up north for the weekend and had arrived home in the Midlands tired and groggy from a horrendous journey down the M6. Alice, fiercely headstrong as she was, had insisted that she help with unpacking, knowing I was drained from the gruelling drive. In the end it was nothing more than an accident. She’d slipped on the stairs with the suitcase - a seemingly innocuous fall, if she hadn’t been so heavily pregnant.

I’ve never heard such screams of despair as came from her in that instant. It was as though all the possible horrors of life had suddenly flashed before her eyes. I’ll never know what she truly felt in those moments - how any mother felt knowing that the baby she had been carrying with such love, with so much hope, might be taken away.

Within seconds we had both flown into a mad panic. One way or another the baby was coming, there was no doubt. I called an ambulance immediately, but barely seconds after putting the phone down we were in my car, heading the short distance to Good Hope A&E, which was less than two miles from our home. It felt like we had no other choice. We couldn’t bear the thought of waiting even another two minutes for the ambulance to arrive.
By the time they got Alice onto a gurney, she was already fully dilated. I remember imagining that the baby’s head was pushing out - not that I dared look at the business end of things. Moments later, there was a whole new problem brewing. The umbilical cord was wrapped around the baby’s neck. If Alice kept on pushing - almost impossible for her not to do, given the huge contractions that were consuming her - there was a real chance the baby would suffocate.

The subsequent half hour went by in a blur. Alice somehow found the strength and focus to sign a consent form before she was rushed into an operating theatre for an emergency caesarean. Completely lost and ghostlike, I stood by Alice’s head, squeezing her hands and looking into her teary and bloodshot eyes. Trying my best to avert my gaze from the gaping, bloody hole in her stomach that was being accidentally reflected in the monitor in front of me.

Her body bucked up and down as the doctors tugged fiercely at her midriff, pulling apart the layers of fat, muscle and tissue to reach the baby. My impression of a delicate procedure was miles from the reality and the look of horror in Alice’s eyes grew with every jolt.

And then, when it was over, when we should have been greeted by the cries of our first-born, there was only a deathly silence. The baby couldn’t breathe properly. In an instant he was rushed off to another room with barely a word spoken to us. I held tight to Alice’s hands as the doctors and nurses who were still present worked on stitching her up.

Minutes later a nurse came back into the operating room, a small bundle wrapped in a light-blue towel cradled in her arms. She beamed at us and I knew what it meant. Tears began to stream as uncontrollable joy washed over me. She handed me the baby. My baby. Our baby. Harry. And when I looked into Alice’s eyes, no words were needed.
From that moment, Harry had always been such a happy baby. It was almost as if the trauma of his birth had mellowed him, like he was trying to apologise for having put us through so much angst. And Alice, exhaustion aside, was such a natural and loving mother. I know everyone says that but it was true. She was so proud of her son, as I was of her.

Yet Harry’s mother - his biological mother - had been taken away from him, from me too, so cruelly and unexpectedly. Seven years had passed since her murder. Gemma thought it was morose that I still came to the cemetery twice a year, on Alice’s birthday and on Harry’s birthday. Or maybe she was just jealous? It seemed only right to me that a mother should get to see her son growing up. And I would continue to visit her grave even if Harry wanted to break free.

Each time I came, I left a picture of Harry next to the flowers so Alice could see the fine young boy he was becoming.

I felt a tear roll down my cheek. A fierce gust of wind blew it off my face and it flew away in the cold, damp air.

Harry had always come with me before. Had always been there by my side.

But this time, all Alice would see of him was a picture.
I laid the flowers down by the gravestone, then propped the picture in place in a plastic frame cover. I took away the old picture from five months ago when I’d last been there, on Harry’s birthday. The picture was now dirty and faded, parts of it almost entirely scratched away from the battering of wind and rain it had taken.

I looked at the gravestone and silently read the gold letters that said little of Alice’s life. Just a few facts that in a hundred years would mean nothing to anyone. Then I turned to leave, unable to muster any words.

I was nearly back at my bike when I saw them. The black Range Rover - the same one I’d spotted at the park the previous day - was clumsily pulled up on a grass verge some twenty yards past my Yamaha. This time, though, it wasn’t just there so the occupants could spy on or spook me. Two men were already out of the vehicle, walking toward me. Both wore long black coats that reached down to their knees, jeans underneath and shiny black shoes - similar attire, but there was a considerable difference in height between the two men.

I’m a shade over six foot one. Not a massive guy by any stretch, but above average. The taller of the two men, though, was a giant: six foot six, maybe as much as six eight, and almost as wide as he was tall. His thick neck burst out around the collar of his coat and
his arms – probably the size of my thighs – strained the fabric of his sleeves.

I knew from past encounters that his size was largely muscle. He was one of those freaks of nature, just naturally gigantic and strong. No amount or combination of drugs or weights or effort could ever make me or ninety-nine per cent of people that size. Hundreds of years ago he probably would have been a fa-uled warrior, perhaps a leader of a clan, a king of men even. In today’s society he was just a brute. An oddity.

The other man? Well, he couldn’t have been more ordinary to look at. He was shorter than me by four or five inches at least. He had an unassuming face, thick-rimmed glasses and mousy hair cut neat and short. He wouldn’t have drawn a second glance from any passer-by were it not for the man-mountain that strode with him.

And yet it was the smaller figure of the two whom I was loath to see: I truly detested him and I hugely feared him. That was why, when the men reached me, my heart was already pounding in my chest and I could feel the nerves building, my hands and legs shaking in response.

‘Mr Stephens. Funny place for a walk,’ Callum O’Brady snorted in his thick Irish accent.

‘What are you doing here?’ I answered back, sounding a lot more confident than I felt. Whatever power O’Brady had over me, I knew that showing weakness to him was the last thing I could afford to do.

‘Your good wife said you’d be here.’

‘You’ve been to my home?’

‘Well, we didn’t come across her while out getting milk and bread, my man.’

‘You’ve got no right going to my house. Talking to her. She’s got nothing to do with any of this.’

‘Calm yourself,’ O’Brady said. ‘I didn’t bone her. Though I could tell she probably needs a good screw. I think you need to take better care of her.’
‘Oh, she wanted it all right,’ the big man said in his grating southern accent. ‘A proper naughty girl that one.’

‘Fuck you,’ I said, my heart skipping a beat at my ill-thought-out response.

The big man stepped forward, fists clenched, but O’Brady put an arm out to stop him.

‘Not nice, Stephens,’ O’Brady said. ‘I’m being civil here. But if you’re going to be a prick about it then Elvis will happily pummel you into the ground.’

Elvis. It wasn’t his real name, of course; I had no clue what that was. I also had no idea why O’Brady had chosen that moniker for his most trusted muscleman - I wasn’t a party to that in-joke.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry. But that’s my wife you’re talking about. Of course I’m going to defend her.’

‘Understood. We’re both family men. Like you.’

Elvis grunted. I imagined him with his litter of little apes - some kids had no chance.

‘Just please don’t go to my house again,’ I said. ‘I don’t want Gemma or the kids brought into this.’

‘What, are you ashamed of your business partners?’ O’Brady scoffed.

‘You know it’s not like that.’

‘Yeah, at the moment you’re probably right. Because it’s starting to feel like we’re not business partners at all. It’s starting to feel like you’re treating me like some sort of dope. Taking me for a ride. Is that what you’re doing, Stephens?’

‘No. Not at all. I -’

‘I need the money,’ O’Brady stated.

My shoulders slumped at the inevitable turn in the conversation.

‘You’ll get it,’ I said.

‘But I haven’t got it. That’s the problem. So where is it?’

‘I’ll get it. Just trust me.’

‘Trust you? Well, isn’t that the whole basis of our relationship? Isn’t that how it’s worked from day one? If
I hadn’t trusted you, we wouldn’t have started out in the first place. But you’re wearing my patience thin now. I need the money. You’ve got two days.’

‘Two days?! I can’t just –’

‘Two days, Stephens,’ O’Brady said, turning to leave. ‘Or your precious wife will become more involved in this than you’d care to imagine. Elvis.’

I opened my mouth to protest and never saw the fist from the big man coming. It smacked into my midriff and I let out a painful exhale. Before I knew it I was on my knees, the world spinning and blurry. I took deep breaths, trying not to puke.

By the time clarity started to return the Range Rover had already backed off the verge and was heading out toward the road.

Two days. That was all I had to find one hundred thousand pounds. If I didn’t, I could kiss goodbye any semblance of a normal life that still remained.

For years I’d tried to keep my life on an even keel. I’d never truly overcome the trauma of Alice’s death, though with the help of Gemma and the kids I’d certainly come close to salvaging a life for myself. At one point it had really looked like I would come out the other side on top.

That was all in the past now, though. I’d been dragged right back down to the bottom once more. Callum O’Brady had been there every step of the way, and was only too happy to watch me fall.

I was in a bind. It wasn’t just my life on the line, it was the lives of every member of my family. With O’Brady on my back, I firmly believed that.

I had to get that money.
I headed away from the cemetery with my mind on fire. I was in too deep to get out on my own. I needed help. Yet that was easier said than done. Could I really push my pride aside and ask for the help I so desperately needed? If the solution was that simple then I would have done it years ago. Pride comes before a fall. Well, I was certainly falling.

There was always another option. One I’d considered many times over the last seven years but had always been too much of a coward to see through.

Could I really do it this time, though? It would certainly be a way out for me. In time, it would release Gemma and Harry and Chloe too. O’Brady surely wouldn’t care. He’d find some other mug to bleed dry, and no-one else would bat an eyelid.

Could I really do it? Did I want to?

Instead of heading back home, I turned right out of the cemetery toward the A38 dual carriageway. I twisted the throttle and the 1000cc engine of the Yamaha growled and whined with pleasure as the bike shot forward at speed.

I’d bought the Yamaha two years previously, against Gemma’s wishes. She thought it was dangerous and pointless. We already had two cars to get around. She told me - only partly in jest - I was having a mid-life crisis a decade too early. I’d always wanted a bike, though, but had long put off buying one in favour of
spending on more sensible things. Finally, two years ago, I’d put better judgment to one side and gone with my heart for once.

Riding the bike was a release from the real world. I loved the feeling of getting away from everything. Alice’s dad, whom I still saw every few months when the kids went to visit him and his wife, often warned me of the dangers of motorbikes. In fact, it had become one of his favourite pastimes, it seemed. He’d been a rider for many years and had been through his fair share of scrapes. The stark warning he’d first given me was simple: everyone comes off. And he wasn’t wrong. I’d fallen off the bike twice. Not at great speed, otherwise I surely wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale. Both times had nonetheless shaken me.

The second time had been worse than the first. I’d leaned into a corner at a little under thirty miles an hour and the back tyre had inexplicably lost traction. I don’t know why. The conditions were good and I wasn’t travelling too fast. Whatever it was, I’d ended up off the bike, scraping along the ground until I came to a crashing stop against a parked car. The friction had burned through the right leg and arm of my leathers and taken away a good chunk of skin from each of my limbs.

A couple of weeks in bandages had seen me through, but the scars on both my leg and my arm remained as a warning. If I hadn’t had the leathers on, the fall would likely have taken away flesh and muscle too.

In the aftermath of the accident Alice’s dad had been only too keen to share stories of skin grafts and amputations and life-long physical deformity. I’d seen and heard first hand just how dangerous motorbikes could be. But as I headed toward the A38, those stories and memories and my own caution couldn’t have been further from my mind.

I reached the roundabout and headed right toward a long stretch of dual carriageway that had little traf-
fic, particularly during the middle of the day. Within seconds the powerful bike eased past one hundred miles per hour. The road was regularly used by bikers who congregated at the Bassetts Pole roundabout from where I’d just come. I’d never been part of that social scene, but I could see why they enjoyed the roads around there so much. I’d put the Yamaha through its paces on numerous occasions but had always stopped short of its full potential.

This time I wasn’t going to hold back.

I pulled on the throttle further and the bike gained another twenty miles per hour with ease. I edged it into the fast lane to overtake a lorry and the bike wobbled in the heavy slipstream. I whizzed past a car, the bike still gaining speed, and barely heard the honking horn above the din of my engine.

I didn’t slow down. In fact, by that point I was home free with not a car or bike or lorry in sight ahead. I turned the throttle further, adrenaline making my heart pump faster. My hands squeezed the grips and my legs tensed, as though doing so would somehow help to keep me on the speeding machine.

I closed my eyes.

I thought about O’Brady. Alice. I thought about Gemma and the children. I thought about my life and how it seemed to be moving from one disaster to the next.

I needed a way out. For me. For those I loved.

I turned the throttle as far as it would go. I squeezed my eyelids tightly shut, trying to close everything out. Trying to shut out the thoughts, the memories, that would change my mind.

Body braced, I waited for the inevitable.

After a few seconds, no matter how hard I tried to keep a blank mind, the doubts began to creep in. I tried to push them away, but it was no use. It was like trying to sweep away the tide: no matter how much I pushed, the waves just kept coming and coming, crashing ashore, destroying all barriers in their path.
How much longer would it take? I wasn’t sure I could hold out. By my calculation the next junction was still about a mile away. Perhaps twenty or so seconds. Or would I come off the bike before then? With the growing doubts in my mind, I contemplated whether to just pull on the handlebars and head straight for the central reservation. Would I feel pain or would I be obliterated the second the bike tipped me off?

I couldn’t do it. Something was stopping me. With my eyes still closed, with the engine fully revved and loving every second of having been set free, I willed something to happen. Willed my life to end right there.

And then it happened.

A stone in the road perhaps. Or a gust of wind, though it was impossible to tell because the air was already howling past me at such speed. Whatever it was, it knocked the bike off balance. The Yamaha wobbled from left to right under me.

If I’d just let myself go, if I’d let the bike do its work ...

But I couldn’t. An image flashed before me and my eyes shot open. Immediately I braked and fought for control. The engine whined then growled then spat. The rapid deceleration made me shoot up and forward in the seat, and it was only because I was so tense and my hands were so tightly gripping the handlebars that I didn’t fly off. As the speed shot down, the wobbling worsened for a second or two until I finally regained control. In just a few moments the bike was almost at a complete stop.

As my heart pounded in my chest and my whole body shook, I heard the blaring horn from the car I had passed, and its driver and passenger screaming expletives, as it overtook me. Then came the lorry, its thundering bulk slapping a waft of cool air into me.

I watched them head off toward the junction, just a couple of hundred yards in front. Just a few seconds away if only I’d had the nerve to keep on going. I hung my head down, dejected.
I’d bottled it. I’d failed. Again. I was a coward. What other explanation was there? I’d always been a coward and I always would be.

And my cowardliness had left me facing a path ahead that was bound to be more painful than the death I couldn’t face.
‘Do you have any regrets?’ she asked.

The woman sitting across from me on the other side of the desk was in her early thirties, I guessed. She wore a navy-blue suit, an unpretentious blouse underneath. Her straight hair was tied back neatly and on the end of her nose was a pair of silver-rimmed glasses. She looked formal and stoic, yet her manner was pleasant and engaging.

Still, I didn’t answer her question for a good while. There was so much to consider before I could answer fully. Really, it was a closed question. A yes or no answer would have sufficed. Yet I knew that wasn’t what she wanted. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen her and it wouldn’t be the last. I was getting used to our sessions now. Used to her questions and her manner, and to me talking. She wanted me to open up, to tell her about my life and the things I’d done and give an explanation, some sort of reasoning. She said she was there for my benefit. To assess me. To help me. I wasn’t sure I trusted any of that. But I hadn’t held back. I’d given her what she wanted.

‘All of the things I did were me,’ I said at last.
‘What do you mean by that?’
‘If you put me into those situations again and again then ninety-nine times out of a hundred you’d get the same results. I can’t make excuses for my mistakes. Would I rather they hadn’t happened? Yes. I wish
I could take back some of the things I’ve said and done in my life. Who doesn’t? But it was all me.’

‘I’m not sure that answers the question,’ she said, her tone more authoritative than it had been before.

‘Do you regret what you’ve done?’

‘You’re looking for a simple yes or no?’

‘It’s a simple question.’

‘But it’s not a simple answer.’

‘How so?’

‘I regret how my actions have had such an impact on those closest to me, yes. Do I wish I could change things? Of course. If I could go back and be a different person in every situation that has gone wrong in my life then I would. But I can’t do that. I wish I could, but I just can’t.’

‘So the answer is yes?’

‘The answer is: yes and no.’

‘Can you explain why?’

‘Yes I regret how my life has turned out. But no, I don’t regret all of the things I’ve done. They were ... necessary.’

‘Necessary?’

‘Yes. I did what I had to do.’
‘Are you fucking crazy?’ Gemma screamed.

Her berating me was understandable, under the circumstances - but the venom in her voice surprised me still. I was standing in the doorway to the lounge. She was across the room, standing by the fireplace. Even at that distance I felt myself cower at the ferocity of her voice, my tail well and truly between my legs. I knew there was simply no point in fighting this one. I was in too deep and I needed her help.

I had still been a shaking wreck when I’d finally had the guts to make my way back home. I wasn’t sure whether that was because of the perilous situation I’d put myself in out on the A38, or anxiety over what was now to come. Perhaps it was lingering regret for having failed to take my own life.

If Gemma had sensed my inner turmoil, she didn’t mention it. In fact, she’d simply gone into full attack mode the moment I’d laid my proposition out to her.

Not that I could really blame her for that.

‘I don’t know what else to do,’ I said meekly.

‘Just what trouble have you got yourself in this time?’

‘This time?’

‘Damn it, Ben, it was a figure of speech. You need to tell me everything. The truth. Who is he?’

Where to start? I mean, so much of the story was fucked up. I didn’t know how to explain my relation-
ship with O’Brady to Gemma, let alone how I’d pretty much thrown away our life savings with that thug.

But I had no other option than to tell her something.

‘He’s a businessman,’ I said.

‘Oh yeah, of course he is. And I’m the fucking Queen.’

‘To me you are,’ I said, managing an unconvincing smile.

‘Not the time for lame jokes, Ben. How the hell do you owe a thug like that so much money?’

‘It was a business deal. It didn’t go well.’

‘Gambling? Did you lose all of our money gambling?’

‘No! Of course not.’

That would have been a simple explanation: losing the money gambling and borrowing from O’Brady to fuel a die-hard habit. Certainly easier to explain than the murky and trouble-riddled relationship I’d built up with O’Brady over the years.

‘You know that’s not me, Gemma. I was doing this for us.’

‘So? What was it?’

‘It was a property deal. A development. You know I’ve always been interested in doing that. I should have told you, I know, but ... I don’t know why I didn’t. I was scared you wouldn’t want me to go through with it. And I wanted to surprise you when it was done.’

‘Yeah well, you’ve certainly done that.’

‘O’Brady and I both put money in. It didn’t go well. We both lost. But ... I guess he lost more.’

‘So how do you owe him money? If you’ve both lost money on some crappy development, that should be the end of it.’

‘It’s hard to explain.’

‘Try me, Ben. If you want my help, you’re going to have to try me.’

‘He says it’s my fault it went wrong. He says I owe him for his losses.’
‘Was it your fault?’
‘No. I don’t know. Maybe. Either way, he’s not the sort of man to argue the toss with.’

Gemma gave me a blank stare. I held her gaze, not knowing what else to do or say. Well, I could tell her more, but I was certain that wouldn’t help my position. I knew that the more details I gave, the more of the mess I revealed, the less likely it was that she’d help.

Eventually she shook her head and looked away.

‘How the hell did you even meet a man like that?’ she said.

I was quite impressed that she’d read O’Brady for the scumbag he was. From what I’d gathered, he’d been on the doorstep for less than five minutes. Gemma hadn’t even invited him into the house, her naturally suspicious instincts on high alert. Luckily for her - and for me - O’Brady had been accommodating of her lack of accommodation. I was sure if he visited again, she wouldn’t get away with such a slight. O’Brady was a dangerous, violent and vindictive man. Even in the brief time he’d been on our doorstep, Gemma had figured out just what a slimy character he was.

‘Ben?’
‘I don’t know. It just happened,’ I said.
‘Oh yeah. I’ve heard that one before.’
‘What’s that supposed to mean?’
‘Nothing.’
‘No, it’s something. What does that mean? When I have I ever let you or the kids down before?’

Whatever she could say of me, my love and devotion for my children was one hundred per cent unwavering.

‘Forget it,’ Gemma said. ‘This isn’t the time. We need to figure this mess out first.’

‘This mess? Like there’s more?’

‘Just stop!’ she shouted. ‘Look at us! Look at the way we are! Always fighting, always on each other’s backs. Just drop it. I can’t keep living like this.’ She moved away from the fireplace and slumped down onto
the armchair by the bay window, her head in her hands.

‘I know,’ I said, frozen in the doorway. ‘I’m sorry. It will get better.’

‘When?’ she said, lifting up her head, her eyes teary.

‘Soon. But we need to get that money. Seriously, Gemma, we need that money tomorrow. These guys aren’t messing about. I’ve seen what they’re capable of.’

‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell me before,’ she said. ‘Why have you kept this to yourself? We could have prevented all of this.’

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

‘Are you?’

‘Yes. I really am.’

She sighed, wiping at her tears with the sleeve of her jumper. I made to go over to her. I wanted to hold her and comfort her. But as I stepped forward, she held up a hand to stop me.

‘Don’t,’ she said.

I stayed where I was. My heart thudded in my chest with anticipation as I awaited her next words.

‘I’ll do it,’ she said. She closed her eyes and turned away from me. ‘What choice do I have? I can’t have those men coming to the house again. What if the kids had been in? We need this to be over.’

‘Honey, thank you so much,’ I said, striding up to her. Before she had the chance to protest I leaned over, grabbed her with both arms and pulled her into me. I’m not sure it was exactly a loving hug - I was consumed with relief more than anything - and I couldn’t help but feel a fraud because of that, even though my next words to her were genuine. ‘I love you. I really do.’

‘Yeah,’ was all she said to that. ‘Where’s my phone?’
I grabbed her mobile from the mantelpiece and handed it to her, then stood straight, watching over her, willing her to make the call.

I stared as she scrolled through the contacts list. I could feel my hands shaking, my legs too, as adrenaline rushed through me. Only then, in that moment, when Gemma was about to come to my rescue, did I realise just how far the situation had spiralled and how close to the bottom I’d come. But this was it, the turning point. If we could just get through this one, things would finally be on the up.

The phone was to her ear. I waited with baited breath so that I’d be able to hear the muted blips of the dial tone followed by the familiar voice. The tension was unbearable.

But I should have known better. I should have known that life wouldn’t ever work out that smoothly for me.

Before the call had connected, there was loud knock on the front door. Frustration gripped me when I saw Gemma pull the phone away from her ear and press the red button to stop the call. Barely a split-second later, though, I was overwhelmed with anxiety. Because there was a much more immediate concern.

Who the hell was at the door?

Gemma was clearly thinking the same thing. She was staring at me, her eyes wide in fear, her mouth open.

‘Is that …?’

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. I knew she was thinking the same thing I was: O’Brady.

‘He said I had two days,’ I said, willing the scum-bag to have kept to his word. But could I really trust him?

I knew the answer to that. No, I couldn’t. Not at all.

‘Oh yeah, ’cos he seemed like a really genuine bloke to me,’ Gemma said.
‘He wouldn’t come again,’ I said, wishing my words to be true. If he really was back at the house ... well, I didn’t even want to think about what that could mean. ‘I told him he couldn’t come here again.’

‘You’re not filling me with much confidence here, Ben.’

Three more knocks on the door. Heavy knocks. Purposeful. I could feel my heart jerk with each thud.

I walked over to the window and lifted the edge of the curtain to peek out. From the bay window of the lounge I wasn’t able to see the front door, but I could see the car parked on the street beyond our driveway.

On seeing it I knew without doubt who was out there.

‘Ben, let’s just call the police,’ I heard Gemma say from behind me.

I let go of the curtain and it flopped back into place. I stared at the closed drapes for a few seconds, then hung my head down, my brain spinning with thoughts of what to do next.

‘Ben?’

I turned, avoiding eye contact with Gemma, but I saw that she was standing too, directly in front of me. I edged past her toward the lounge door.

‘I’m calling the police,’ Gemma said. ‘We have to. It’s the only way.’

I was just about at the door. I stopped and turned. Gemma had the phone in her hand and was doing her best with shaky fingers to key in the short number.

‘No, Gemma. Don’t,’ I said.

Her hand froze and she looked up at me. Her face was a weary mess. She looked broken, defeated. She’d known Callum O’Brady for all of five minutes and this was what his presence had done to her.

That’s how I’ve felt for years, I thought.

‘Ben, they can help us. We have to call the police.’

‘There’s no need to call the police,’ I said to her, my voice calmer than it had been moments earlier. ‘They’re already here.’
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob is the author of the critically acclaimed and best-selling Enemy series, James Ryker series and Sleeper 13 series of thrillers. His books have sold over one million copies to date, with many reviewers and readers having likened Rob's work to authors at the very top of the genre, including Lee Child and Vince Flynn.

Rob began writing in 2009 following a promise to his wife, an avid reader, that he could pen a ‘can’t put down’ thriller. He worked for nearly 13 years for a global accounting firm after graduating from The University of Nottingham in 2002, specialising in forensic fraud investigations at both national and international levels. Rob now writes full time.

Originally from the North East of England, Rob has lived and worked in a number of fast paced cities, including New York, and is now settled in the West Midlands with his wife and young sons.

From Rob: Thank you so much for reading! Check out the rest of my books on my website here.

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