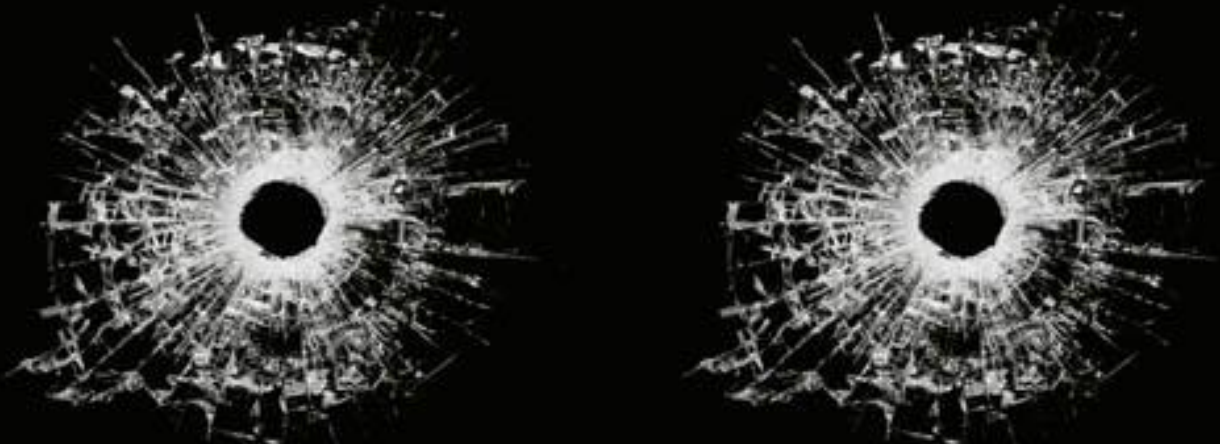




SURVIVAL



STRATEGY

He just wanted to retire -
They just wanted revenge ...

A thriller by
MAX DRAYTON

SURVIVAL STRATEGY

PART TWO OF A TRILOGY

A thriller by

Max Drayton

There are scenes and language of an adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

If you enjoyed this novel, please let me know.

If you didn't ... I have other novels.

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SURVIVAL STRATEGY

PART TWO OF A TRILOGY

A thriller by Max Drayton

PROLOGUE

I started out to write Exit Strategy as a story woven around fact. It soon became very difficult to separate fact from entertainment. This is the influence the media has over us regarding the genre of assassins.

Whatever I created seem to have some echo in a movie, or story, I had experienced in the past. I thought original ideas did not exist. I saw my ideas in TV programmes and thought they had all come to the same reasoning as myself. But at heart, the first book comprised much original thought on my part.

I feel I gave much of the true facts I could to this first novel and so the content of this sequel will be more towards the fictional side of the subject. I hope I don't see these ideas coming from a TV screen or eBook in the future.

The media is a greedy entity. But there is only so much originality to go around.

MAX DRAYTON

PREVIOUSLY

BOOK ONE - EXIT STRATEGY

Jagger Gilchrist wanted to retire.

He wanted an end to his career as a contract killer known as the infamous Magician, the master of trickery and disguise. After informing his handler, he is shocked to realise that the people who previously employed him now want him dead.

An attempt at assassinating him fails, but the assassin kills his handler by mistake and Jagger sets off in pursuit. He catches the assassin, only to find it's a woman called Olga Kobay. He discovers she's been held prisoner and forced to take on assignments for a small time Hungarian crook named Luca Lacusta.

Because of Olga's failure, Luca sends his thugs to punish her and Jagger intervenes, directly confronting Luca and pretending Olga's dead. Luca tricks Jagger into recruiting Olga's brother Henrik direct from Hungary to replace Olga. Now Jagger must agree to this sanction, to protect Olga's life.

Meanwhile, Lucie, Jagger's on/off professional lover, is looking after the "Deceased" Olga. At this time Lucie learns that both Jagger and Olga are assassins and doesn't take it very well.

Jagger flies out to Hungary and meets Olga's family. They are heavily guarded and bullied by Luca's men. After careful preparation, Jagger devises a plan to get rid of them. Using the family to assist, he sets the trap but the Kobay family are made of stern grit and eliminate the invaders themselves.

As part of a pre-arranged plan, Olga was supposed to surprise attack Luca at the same time, thus eliminating all arms of the octopus that was chocking the Kobay family. She fails, and Luca holds her captive.

For her safe release, Jagger has to perform a task for Luca, Mario Arzano and Primo Vespa. He has to assassinate a politician and his aide. Planned in detail, Jagger fakes the hit on the politician but kills the two mafia men instead. At the same time, Olga's brother, who has been helping Jagger, releases Olga from the clutches of Luca's men. Now Jagger is after Luca.

Luca has pre-planned his getaway and has a helicopter waiting to get him to France, but Jagger and friends catch him. As they shoot and kill Luca, a new assassin strikes from the woods. Jagger and company go on the run.

Back in London, Jagger gets Olga and her brother on a plane back to Hungary. Now on his own, he can wait for the assassin to strike at him again. The assassin confronts him - a young woman named Naomi Ryce-

Hardin. She has a twin brother who she has boasted is in Hungary to kill the rest of the Kobay family. Jagger tricks her and she is killed.

Jagger races to Hungary to save them. Using stealth and cunning, he assassinates Justin Ryce-Hardin and ensures the family are free from the Hungarian crooks.

Back home, Jagger decides to marry Lucie.

Jagger plants the dead body of Naomi at the home of the man who ordered the twins to assassinate Jagger and the Kobays – Jamison Willoughby, head of a crime organisation called The Brethren.

The rest of the organisation are wiped out in a bombing that Willoughby blames on The Magician. Willoughby goes on trial.

Will Willoughby track down and find The Magician and prove his own innocence?

SURVIVAL STRATEGY

PART ONE – A dammed reputation

CHAPTER ONE

INTERNET

Wednesday 9th

[Do U really know what the police are doing.com](#)

Jamieson Willoughby has been released from jail.

Thread: Do any criminals remain in jail these days?

Wednesday 10th

[Askingtherightquestions.com](#)

Jamieson Willoughby was released because there was not enough hard evidence to prove he knew the victim, Naomi Ryce-Hardin. However, he is still being investigated over several cases involving his original enterprise, The Brethren.

Thread: How often do the guilty go free?

Thursday 11th

[conspiracyUK.com](#)

The father of the murdered girl, Charles Ryce-Hardin is appealing for anyone who knows the whereabouts of his son Justin, to make contact. There is a large reward for the successful return of Justin to the Ryce-Hardin estate.

Thread: Let's see how far he gets with that!

CHAPTER TWO

JAMIESON WILLOUGHBY

A man cannot know how free he is until he's been imprisoned.

The air tastes and smells different. Daylight looks different. Life...is different.

As I heard the heavy metallic clang of the prison door behind me, I made a vow to myself. Never to hear a prison door close again, especially if it was keeping me locked inside.

It'd been four weeks out of my life, but it felt like four years. Every hour - a day. Every day - a week. To call it hell would be giving hell a good name.

I'm a man that likes life's luxuries. I surround myself with the quality of life. I'm prepared to go to any lengths to obtain and retain those luxuries. Prison has none of those luxuries.

Although now free, for a while at least, I could not go back to my former life. I *have* no former life. It's all been taken away. I've only what I stand up in, only what I entered prison with. A suit, some cash and my mind.

And no one to meet me. That's the hardest to take.

For those that have not experienced it, the ramifications of being accused of murder cannot be imagined. A sense of righteous indignation. Impassioned pleading to deaf ears. The humiliation of incarceration. The removal of all freedom. Abandonment by your family and friends. The loss of everything you've worked for in life. Removal of all hope. The realisation of a hopeless fate. Depression and fear. The list is endless.

Enough to make a grown man cry.

As I sat on the bus with a small parcel of my personal effects on my lap, I reflected on if I felt right now, was better than how I felt sitting in my cell. Not a lot of difference I decided. Only my clothing was different.

I watched the world pass by and saw the people going about their daily lives. Totally unaware how I envied them. A man washing his car. He had a life, possibly a nice family. Right now I couldn't afford the hose to clean the car. I used to have several cars. And people to drive them too. I can't drive, never had to. I used to hold lavish parties and entertain prospective business partners. Now, I'd hesitate to buy chips in the Burger King I just passed. My meagre resources would have to last a long time.

At the bus stop, I watched the bus drive away. I envied the driver. He had a life of his own. He would control it as best he could. A future to look

forward to. Money in the bank. A roof over his head. A beer every now and again. Prospects.

The hostel was a long walk from the bus stop, but they were expecting me and made me welcome. The room was small and simple, but much better than the prison cell. For the first time that day I felt I'd stepped forward, rather than backwards.

I sat on the bed and held my head in my hands. I was never a self-pitying man; I was not about to start now. But I knew this was a low in my life. It was now my resolve to make it the starting point to move on up.

I looked out of the small window at the row of houses opposite. A typical London street. Overcrowded, busy during the day and night. Multi-ethnic inhabitants. Life. Full of life. Where there's life there's hope. I had to hang onto that.

The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. I had to take that first step. My big decision was....what was that first step to be? I invested in a phone call.

CHAPTER THREE

CHARLES RYCE-HARDIN

I don't think a father can ever recover from the loss of a child.

A parent always expects their offspring to outlive them, not be taken in the prime of their lives, in such a savage and unnecessary way.

All my life I've had people I knew, trusted and even loved, die in a variety of ways. Overcoming the grief became a part of the job. A part of life. But your own children? Never get used to that.

I retired a Colonel. Where I saw the world and all its violence, anger and oppression. I helped tame it, control it, make it bow down and submit. It cost the lives of my men. Their blood. But it gave them glory. Respect.

The army isn't for everyone. But for Naomi and Justin, it was just out of their reach. If they were in the army, they'd be alive today. I keep telling my wife Sara that, but she still refuses to believe me.

I sit here and flick through the photo albums and feel the stinging behind my eyes. I cannot swallow properly, and I really should stop doing this every day. It upsets Sara and I know that Samantha thinks I'm maudlin. Perhaps that's because she never really got on with her siblings. Wait until she's a parent. Then she'll know what we're going through.

No. I hope she never has to experience that.

I don't know what's worse. To discover your daughter has been murdered and know the man that's part of it is in prison. Or, to know your son is missing and not know if he's alive, or dead?

The police are useless. They've not a clue about where Justin might be. Not a clue. Naomi....she turns up in the boot of a car and the police only knew that, because of an anonymous phone call.

I closed the album to sit and think. The fire crackles and should be warm, friendly and welcoming. But in this huge study, the dark wooden walls crowd in on me. My misery is definitely deepening. I'm like a pea in a wooden box, rattling around with no direction to go. No purpose in life.

This huge house, once intended for a growing dynasty of Ryce-Hardins, now a mausoleum to two of its departed members.

I don't think I could feel much worse.

Then the phone rang.

The bastard Willoughby looked a lot thinner than he had on the TV.

I saw him arrested and was there to see him charged. Sara couldn't cope with it, but I had to see the man that killed our daughter. If I had a gun, I would've seen him off right there.

Now...he was standing large as life in my own bloody study. I didn't keep a gun in here, ornamental, or otherwise. Just as well, I say.

Willoughby had his head bowed, and so he should. He was quite tall, a six-footer I suppose. Leaning towards porky, but slimmer than when he was arrested, I would say. Light brown receding hair over a high forehead. He had piercing eyes if you know what I mean. Could read your soul and sell it to the devil for you. Bastard!

Thin lips, though. And heavy jowls. Never trust a man with thin lips and heavy jowls.

He was wearing the same suit as when he was arrested. I remember these things. Sticks in the mind, you know. The image of the man that killed your daughter can never be forgotten.

Herbert had shown him in and had left quietly as usual. You never knew Herbert was ever around. Good manservant, known him since I was a Lieutenant. Was my man then too. Getting a little past it now. But I couldn't get rid of him. Saved my life more than once. Good man.

I remained seated and gave Willoughby the Ryce-Hardin stare. Brought grown men to their knees has that stare. Even my superiors were wary of it. Frightens men, you know. And horses. I gave him the stare and waited to see what the bastard wanted with me.

He never looked me in the eye, the coward. He stepped forward towards my desk and put his hand in his pocket. Did the bastard have a weapon? Should've checked. Call for Herbert. He'd be no good. Who else? No one else in the house.

Willoughby put a small pile of objects on my desk and stood back. I just sat and looked at them. Some money, a bunch of keys. A worn photograph, or two. Nothing exciting, or relevant.

'All I own in the world, Mr Ryce-Hardin. Colonel, sir.'

I gave him the stare. What did I care?

'Everything was taken from me the day your daughter died. My home. My family. All my money. And my liberty. Everything. That's now all I have. You lost a daughter, I lost everything.'

I've heard all the sob stories down the years. This was just another. What did I care about the hardships of the man that killed my daughter? 'What do you want?' I was not going to let this bastard wallow in his misery at my expense. In my house.

'I've nothing to offer youbut the truth.'

He stood there, with his eyes looking at the Persian carpet and paused. I waited.

‘I stand here because I’ve been released from prison.’

‘Why?’ was all I could say.

‘The police do not have enough evidence to prove I was responsible for your daughter’s.....death. The truth is...I didn’t kill your daughter.’

‘So you say....’

‘But I know who did.’

The breath caught in my throat. ‘What?’ I said in a croaky voice.

‘I was framed, and I know by whom.’

I stood in anger and frustration. What lies were these? The same mantra he’d clung to during his imprisonment. The police never believed it. Neither did the judge and jury. Why should I?

‘Get out of here. Back to prison. They can’t have let you out. I should never have agreed to let you come here.’

‘Please hear me out, sir!’

‘She was in your car in your driveway, for Christ’s sake, man! Herbert! Call the police.’

‘I’m a free man, Colonel, sir. And it’s because I DIDN’T kill your daughter.’

‘Who did then?’ I asked, moving around the desk. If this fellow was telling the truth, which I doubted.....

‘A contract killer called, The Magician.’

‘A what, called who?’

He’d said all this after his arrest and no one had heard of the fellow. I pretended innocence to this story.

‘It’s a long story, sir, and I’d like to tell it all to you. But may I have a seat? Perhaps some water?’

Herbert opened the door slowly and looked in. ‘Something you wanted, sir?’

I was about to wave him away but hesitated. ‘Bring in some water.’

‘Yes, sir. Right away.’ Herbert left silently.

I saw the fellow sway and try to find something to hold on to. I’m not a barbarian, I’m a cultured man of the world. I told him to take a seat. I would not believe a word this fellow would say. But he had a story and the fact they let him out of prison made his story more...somehow more credible.

I could see the man was distressed. He looked tired. I've learned from my military career that most men will try it on to get their way. This man could fake this weakness, to subvert me. Get my sympathy. But I was above all that, by God. Yes, I was.

'Go on.' I said as I sat at my desk and was prepared to sniff out the lies. Put this man to the third degree. The truth he wanted to say, eh? I'd get the truth all right.

'I've never met your daughter, sir. Let alone....harmed her. I believe....she was a case of mistaken identity.'

'How so?' I used my Colonel's voice for that question. Let the fellow know who he was dealing with here.

'The man who....saw her last believed she was a contract killer, like himself. He believed she was trying to kill him. So he killed her.' He sat and stared at me for the first time. Seeing how his lies were working, no doubt.

'Contract killer, you say. What...an assassin sort of fellow?'

'Exactly that, sir. An assassin. A gun for hire. A hitman, I believe it's called.'

'By God! You sure?'

'Positive, sir. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He mistook her for a threat and killed her.'

'But she was in the boot of your car!'

'Just where he placed her, sir, then called the police. First thing I knew about it was when they opened the boot. Horrible sight.'

I was getting confused. This damned fellow seemed genuine in what he said, but how could it be the truth?

'Ahhh!' I said. 'Why your car? What has he got against you, eh?'

'Well, a similar problem there. The....fellow seems to be totally misguided. He seems to think that I ordered someone to kill him.'

I was getting to grips with this now. 'This fellow thought you were trying to kill him. You hired someone to do it, and that someone was my daughter? Preposterous!'

'Indeed it is. Preposterous. But that's what he thinks happened. Not what has really happened.'

'And what's that?'

'None of those things. I didn't want him dead and your daughter had nothing to do with it.' He blew his nose into a silk handkerchief.

The door opened, and Herbert shuffled in. He put the tray on the desk and shuffled silently out again. Pouring two glasses of water I gave one to Willoughby, who drank it down in one. I gave him the other. I poured myself a small whiskey and sipped as I digested what the fellow had said.

‘What proof do you have for any of this?’ I said sitting down.

‘None.’ He said with a resigned shrug. ‘I’ve been imprisoned since they opened the car boot. All my capital has been frozen or commandeered by my wife, who has left me. Divorce pending. I’ve no money to make any sort of investigation.’

‘The Magician, you say. So...who is he exactly?’

‘Well...here it gets a little complicated. No one knows.’

‘What? Sohow do you know he’s to blame for my....daughter?’

‘A colleague of mine was approached a while ago, by The Magician, and offered money to get a meeting with me.’

‘WHY?’ I said as he drained the second glass of water. Thirsty fellow.

‘I’m coming to that. It appears...I was his next target.’

‘What? He was going to kill you? Why?’

‘I’mwell, not sure. It’s frightening that anyone wants you dead. But this man did and wanted to get close to me to do it. My colleague told him to go away. Not bother us, or he would take action against him. So...it looks like, The Magician thought the action mentioned resulted in me sending someone to kill him, and he thought Naomi was the killer. Bizarre. Truth is stranger than fiction.’

Of course, I believed none of it. I sipped my whisky and studied the man in front of me. He seemed genuine enough. Plausible. Level voice. No sign of nerves. It took courage to come here. But what did he really want with me?

‘I’d like to meet this colleague of yours. I’ve a few questions.’

‘I’d like you to meet him too, but I’m afraid he’s dead.’

‘Dead, you say. When?’

‘He was murdered along with eight others of my board of directors. The police believe it was a bomb detonated by someone unknown. I believe it to beThe Magician.’

I was getting a different picture now. I wracked my memory and slowly pieces came together.

‘You were....you were part of that....Brothers thing weren’t you.’ I pointed my finger at him.

‘Yes. Brethren. We were a group of like-minded businessmen trying to establish a corporation to conduct legal and efficient business.’

‘The police think otherwise, don’t they?’ I was now wagging my finger at the man.

‘So did the Magician. They’re all wrong. There was nothing dishonest about our work. I can show you the charities we supported. Our financial accounts. All legal and in order. Everything above board.’

‘But....the police....they’re still putting a case against you, right?’

‘Correct, sir. That’s why I’m bereft of all support. Until I can clear my name.....’

‘But they must have some reason to try to prosecute. They must have some proof?’

‘Like they had proof that I murdered your daughter? All probably from the same source as the anonymous phone call that said her body was in my car.’

The fellow sounded plausible. But he had nothing to show his innocence in all this. Even if some of this rubbish was true, he was still responsible for the death of my daughter. Without his involvement, she would still be alive. And so would Justin, for all I knew.

‘Well, thank you for letting me know all this.’ I stood and waited for him to leave.

He remained seated, just staring at me. He seemed to make up his mind and stood up. ‘Your son, Justin?’

I nodded. ‘What about him?’

‘Still missing?’

‘Yes. ‘Fraid so.’

‘I suppose you’d like to have his body returned?’

‘Of course. Assuming he’sdead.’

‘Oh, he’s dead alright. And I know exactly where he is.’

CHAPTER FOUR

SARA RYCE-HARDIN

I've seen what this has done to Charles.

Such an upright, active driving force. A whirlwind of a man, blowing through the house as a demon possessed. Now...introspective. Moping over his lost children. I can understand it, but can I tolerate it?

We're all grieving. I sometimes think he forgets we're also grieving. Samantha's of that age when she's becoming difficult. She was very late in coming to us. She was...an accident. It must be hard to have very much older parents. Charles is fifty-eight and I'm fifty-two. What must be going through her mind? Both her siblings taken without warning. Not knowing why!

You can direct your hate at someone all you like, but it's not going to bring back the dead. Life's for the living. Get on with it. Cry, Dry, and get on with it.

There are a few answers I would like, but most of all I'd like to know what happened to Justin and where is he now? I want closure on this. If he's dead, I want to bury him. If he's alive, I want him back.

Charles has never been an easy man to live with. When you've been in charge of everything all your life, it's hard when you've nothing left to be in charge of. Retirement meant the end of the world. Charles was a lost boy, whose toys have been taken away. Which, in a way, he was. Then losing two children - was the final straw.

I don't know how much money he's spent on private detectives looking for Justin. But there's no real place to start. He disappeared off the planet. At the same time, his sister turned up in the car boot of a man who was arrested for killing her.

Things have now got worse. At least, I think so. Charles latest idea is barking. He's invited someone to have a word with me. He said it was about Justin and Naomi. Charles said it would shed some light on the mystery. I was initially very excited, then he dropped the bombshell. He wanted me to talk to Jamison Willoughby!

He wanted me to be face-to-face with the murderer of my daughter.

I took a few of my prescribed relaxant tablets before Willoughby arrived. I knew I was going to get uptight and tense. I normally don't show when I'm angry, upset, or tense. I believe it's my role in this household to be the stable figure, the centre of reason. But on this occasion, I couldn't trust

myself without some chemical help. So I wanted Charles out of the way in case I failed in that mission.

I saw the clock reach two and felt tense. I was seated with both hands clasped together. I heard the doorbell chime and felt my whole body stiffen.

Our reception room is wonderful. I'd spent many years fine-tuning it to be the perfect place to receive visitors of any standing. Little did I know I was preparing it for the devil himself.

The room is plush with ornate fabrics and cushioned seating. Tall elegant windows draped in fine silks and brocades. Two chandeliers brighten the whole room with flickering diamond shards of light.

I refuse to offer refreshments but had a tall glass of water by my side. And two more pills to take if necessary. I'd told Charles that ten minutes was all I could stand in the man's company and I'd leave after that. He was to get Herbert to throw Willoughby out soon after. Charles had agreed, but I knew reluctantly.

Charles refused to tell me what Willoughby was going to talk about. He said I had to hear it from the horse's mouth. Devil's mouth more like it.

The door opened with a faint sigh over the carpet. Herbert pushed it fully open and stepped to one side saying, 'Mr Jamieson Willoughby to see you, ma'am.'

I fully intend to retain my dignity and so said quietly, 'Show him in, Herbert.' But I refused to stand. I remained seated and glared at the man that entered.

Willoughby walked slowly through the door and kept his eyes downcast. He moved towards me and stood still. We both waited for the other to speak. I had manners and breeding and knew it should be me who spoke first. I clenched my teeth and said, 'You wanted to see me?'

His voice was soft and at any other time quite soothing. This man ran an organisation that covered a variety of business disciplines. He was nobody's fool, he must have something special to achieve that status. But where was he now? Under police investigation for organised crime. You can never tell, they say.

'I want to tell you what's happened to your son and daughter, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. I believe it's important you know the truth.'

I held my stare, which he was too cowardly to return, and I said in a quiet voice, but also with some contempt. 'Of course, you know what happened to them? You killed my daughter?'

He finally looked up to see me. His eyes were very small and close together, but very bright and ...intelligent. A man not to be trusted I was sure.

‘No, ma’am. I did not. The police have withdrawn all those charges from me. I’ve never met your daughter. I was framed by the man who DID murder your daughter.’

The words “murder my daughter” sent a chill right through me.

‘Who was it?’

‘A contract killer who calls himself, The Magician. He killed your daughter and also.....shot your son.’

I stood, my hand moving to my mouth. This was a shock. For the first time some information that was about Justin. Questions ran around my mind, I could not get myself to ask any of them. I was struck dumb and motionless. I felt faint.

‘Why?’ was all I could say.

‘May I sit, ma’am? It’s a long story.’

I waved him to a chair and sat myself.

‘Go on.’ I said, muffled by my hand wiping my lips with a handkerchief. I dared to take the time for a sip of water before I was going to receive news I desperately wanted to hear.

‘I want you to know from the start, Mrs Ryce-Hardin, that for my part I had nothing to do with this man. However, one of the associates of my organisation, the Brethren, now disbanded because everyone is dead, hired him completely *without* my knowledge. It was this act alone that gave The Magician the idea that he was hired by The Brethren. He was further confused when he thought that The Brethren then wanted to assassinate him. Am I going too fast, ma’am?’

I shook my head and stared at his face. Was he telling the truth? How could I tell one way or the other?

‘The difficult part to explain is how....well... he believed your daughter and son worked for us and they were the ones who were trying to kill him. With that in mind, he deliberately set out toeliminate both of them. Then went on to kill everyone associated with The Brethren in a savage case of vengeance. I’m sorry if this is a little hard to take on board. Difficult to understand. But I don’t know of any other way of telling it.’

‘How could he possibly believe my children were trying to kill him? What on earth did they have to do with this...Brethren?’

‘The truth is, ma’am, Justin WAS trying to kill him.’

My heart seemed to have stopped. I felt dizzy and unsure of everything. I quickly sipped more water. He was rising out of his seat offering assistance. I waved him back.

I'm made of resolute stock. My family history would make a good movie. I recovered smoothly and sat up straight. Everything he'd said ran through my mind and I processed it as quickly as possible.

'I don't believe it.' Was the result of my thoughts.

'It's true, ma'am. Not initially, but after, The Magician killed his sister, Justin wanted revenge. I'm sorry to say, I helped him.'

I shot a look at him that would've killed if it was loaded with bullets. 'You WHAT?'

Willoughby stood now and held his hands out as if pleading. 'He was ...distraught. He was threatening to do it all alone. It would've been so dangerous. I wanted to protect him. Send somebody with him. But he refused all of that help. He wanted help to just get him there and the weapons to kill the man who'd murdered his sister. That was all.'

Was he talking about MY Justin? I thought not. It didn't sound right. What was wrong here? My mind raced.

'Why you? Why did he go to you?'

'My associate, now deceased, who ordered the original contract to eliminate The Magician, told me what he had done. I assume out of guilt. Or he knew I would find out, anyway. Needless to say, we would've asked him, and the company he represented, to leave the corporation after such a breach of etiquette and such illegal activity.'

'What's this got to do with my son?'

Willoughby was now speaking very slowly, so I could understand the message he was presenting. 'Yes. It gets very difficult here, I'm afraid. My former associate, Henry Dumarr.....well....he.....let it be known that your son and daughter were the two contractors he'd hired to kill The Magician.'

'Why would he do that? It just wasn't true....'

'Precisely. Dumarr told me he needed time to find a way out of his predicament. He thought if The Magician was chasing shadows, strangers, he'd have the time to get the whole thing sorted.'

'This is not making sense. How on earth would my children get associated with assassins by this...Dumarr?'

'How can I phrase this...there is a website.....promoting a company that offers specialist training...in....military skills. Including....a sniper course.'

I was shaking my head. This was making no sense.

Willoughby placed his hands either side of his chin as he said quietly. 'Both your children feature on that website. As prime students of that sniper course.'

Something clicked in my mind. I remember some course or other Charles had sent them on. He was always pushing them into military events. Course, what course? 'I think they did something like that. What about it?'

The hands clasped the chin more firmly as he said, 'Dumarr saw this and let it be known that these two were his.....contract killers.'

My breath stopped. Could this be true?

'The Magician followed up on this and got to Naomi first and was after Justin.'

My mind was numb.

Willoughby slowly sat down again and waited for my reaction. I said nothing.

'I'm very sorry, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. I feel I had a little responsibility in this, but I could never have stopped what happened. But neither did I have a hand in starting it. The man who did, Dumarr, is dead.'

After a long time of thought and silence from Willoughby I managed to say, 'And where is Justin?'

'Hungary, ma'am. A little place called Herceghalom.'

'Hungary? What on Earth was he doing in Hungary?'

'That's where The Magician was, ma'am. That's why he needed my help.'

'Why did Justin go to you? How did he know you?'

'As I said, Dumarr told me what he'd done. About implicating the Ryce-Hardin twins as assassins. So....I took the responsibility to find Naomi and Justin and warn them. I was too late for Naomi but managed to get to Justin before....'

'Why did I not know about any of this? Did Charles know?'

'No ma'am. I only met your husband today.'

'Justin wouldn't ...keep that sort of thing from us, surely.'

'If it helps, ma'am, Justin did say one thing.'

'What? What did he say?'

'Don't tell my parents. I have to do this on my own. His very words.'

'So why have you waited all this time to tell us where he is and what happened?'

'I was released from prison yesterday, ma'am. I could not contact you any earlier. I thought it only right, and my duty to tell you now. In person. A painful duty at that.'

I stood and needed to get out of the room. Anywhere. ‘Does Charles know this whole story?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘And he believes you?’

‘I think so, ma’am.’

‘Do you have any proof? About any of this?’

‘I know where...Justin lays, ma’am. I can take you there.’

I was thinking clearer now. ‘I want my son back here.’

‘That can be arranged.’

‘Then that’s what we have to do. As for the rest of it. I find it all hard to believe. I’ll need some proof of what you say.’

‘All parties are ...dead, ma’am. You have *only* my word. Finding your son will *have* to be proof enough.’

I stood with my hand on the door handle and turned to Willoughby. ‘This Magician. Where is he now? Dead?’

‘I’m afraid not, ma’am. Nobody knows where he is.’

‘I want him dead.’

I felt cool and like ice as I said it. If Willoughby was telling only half the truth, it seemed that this assassin was the root of all the problems. All the pain and uncertainty.

‘He’s a hard man to find, ma’am. Many have tried. Including Dumarr.’

‘Then *we* must try harder.’

‘Indeed we must, ma’am. However, I do have an idea, if you are willing to listen to it.’

‘Go on.’

‘I think Mr Ryce-Hardin should hear it too. I believe he could be paramount in its success.’

CHAPTER FIVE

NICK BAKER

I hate paperwork. I prefer to load a weapon and shoot up shit.

I have a small desk in my small office and it has more paper in it than anything else. I hate it. I wish I could afford to pay someone else to do it. I wish I could get the grunts that work for me to do it, but bright they're not. I'm surprised some of them can write their own name.

Business is doing okay, but not so I can start employing people to just...push paper. Not yet awhile. I've only the one course today and I've three men helping with that. I sort of want to be out there, but it's a basic strength building course and corporate bonding exercise. Tomorrow we have marksmanship. I like the hands-on in that. I get to shoot up shit.

When the phone rang, it was a good excuse to stop the paperwork.

It was my old commander, Colonel Charles Ryce-Hardin. Wonderful man. Excellent leader. Always time for him.

He wanted me to get over to him as fast as possible. We're in the middle of Buckinghamshire, so it's a good couple of hours or more to get there. I said I would, straight away. I didn't need to ask why. Any call from the Colonel I'd obey without question.

It took me half an hour to get the staff informed and the chain of command organised. I had to change into street clothes then get in the old Porsche and hit the road.

I've always liked the Colonel's study. It really reflects the old man to a T. Solid, dependable, steeped in history. Resolute.

I was early, I always am. He knows me well enough for me to help myself to his drinks cabinet. I poured a large whisky. Downed it quick and poured another. I was alone, so I sat and relaxed in a chair.

This might not be an easy meeting. I'd no idea what it was about. But when the Colonel wants you in a hurry, it's because something's wrong. My initial determination was to stay out of any problems for as long as possible. When the Colonel made a decision, I was quite prepared to carry out any action required. No matter what it was. Just like the old days.

I felt the glow of the drink and saw the glass was empty, I stood and got another. I was looking through the old photos on the walls, of which there were several hundred. I seem to be in most of them. With the Colonel always by my side. Some earlier ones were over twenty years old. I looked young. We all did.

Those days I was clean shaven and fit as a fiddle. No fat, all lean muscle. Still good today, but that little bit older and a little bit too much of the good life. It happens to us all.

I looked closely at some of them. Corporal, Sergeant, grunt. Lance Corporal. I had them all. Not in any linear order. I was broken back a rank so many times I'd lost count. Sometimes it was even asking too much for the Colonel to save me.

I was wild in those days. Couldn't sit still was the problem. Always looking for action. Sometimes it found me. In gaol so many times and bailed out again became the norm.

But Colonel Ryce-Hardin was always there to help me out. Good old RH.

My glass was empty again, and I moved back to the cabinet as the door opened and the Colonel walked in. He seemed surprised to see me and for a moment had nothing to say. I had the drinks cabinet opened, so I said, 'Your usual, sir?'

He looked at his old watch and said, 'A little early isn't it, Baker?'

'Sun's over the yardarm somewhere in the world, sir.' Our usual joke with each other.

He waved me to a chair and sat opposite me. I left the empty glass on the shelf and wished I'd been a little quicker to fill it. He looked serious.

'Listen, Baker. Something's cropped up. Justin, you know.' I nodded. 'A fellow thinks he knows where he might be and I want you to go and get him. Give the lad a good burial. Here. Home. Understand?'

Burial? Was he dead? Should I say something.....'Yes, sir. Just tell me where and I'm on my way.'

'Well...not so easy as that, you see. It appears he's already buried on some chap's farmland.'

'We'll dig him up. Carefully, of course, sir.'

'Well, the farm's in some dammed place in Hungary.'

'Slightly trickier. You'll need to get excavation authorisation from the police, or local authorities, sir.'

'Can't be doing with that, Baker. In and out. No fuss. No one to know, understand?'

'I think so, sir.'

'Big problem, though.'

'Yes, sir?'

‘We don’t know where they’ve buried him.’

‘Ahhh. Could we ask...them?’

‘Tricky situation here. They buried him because...well, he tried to kill them.’

‘Justin, sir? Hardly likely. I mean....Your son, Justin?’

‘Listen, this is just a heads up. They’ll be here in a minute. You and me. We need to discuss a plan of campaign. Perhaps later. Just...well, follow my lead. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good man.’

The Colonel looked tired. He looked ten years older since his son and daughter went. He was hoping Justin was still alive somewhere. So was I. I’d taught Justin survival skills. If he had the opportunity, I think he could’ve survived in a variety of climates. But to hear he was dead. And buried. I needed a drink.

The colonel was sitting back with his eyes closed. Almost asleep. I eased out of the chair and back to the cabinet.

As I was about to pour, Mrs RH came in and looked at me. I nodded, and she stared for a moment. I put the decanter down and went over to her. I shook her hand formally. I could see resentment in her eyes. I hadn’t seen that before. Something was wrong. First the old man, now her. What had happened?

‘Sorry to hear the news, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. Must have been ashock.’

She nodded and moved away. She chose the end of a two-seater and sat down. Her hands resting on her lap and her eyes studying the Colonel.

I was now standing in the middle of the room not knowing what to do. It was one thing to help myself to a drink when in the company of the Colonel. Quite another his wife. I looked at the cabinet, it seemed a long way away. I would have to leave it for now. Perhaps they’d be serving drinks later.

I moved to one wall and chose an upright chair to sit. I was prepared to wait, quietly.

It was a while later that Herbert shuffled up to open the door and announced a Mr Jamison Willoughby was here. The colonel woke from his stupor and Mrs RH said to show him in.

I’d seen this bloke Willoughby on the news. I’d taken notice because he’d murdered Ryce-Hardin’s daughter. I knew Naomi, had trained her. So it was with mixed emotions I watched him walk into the Ryce-Hardin’s home. Something was up!

Willoughby looked at the three of us and nodded a greeting in turn. I nodded back, not knowing what else to do. I remained seated and Willoughby shuffled from one foot to the other.

‘Tell ‘em your plan, Willoughby.’ the Colonel said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

‘How much do you know?’ Willoughby directed at me.

I shrugged, ‘Nothing.’

‘Okay. We believe....I believe, Justin Ryce-Hardin was shot and buried in a small farm in Herceghalom. A little village in Hungary. Somewhere outside Budapest.’

I nodded, ‘Don’t know it, but heard of Budapest.’

‘Good. Point is...two things really....We don’t know exactly where the grave is.’

‘So how do we find him?’ I said without thinking.

‘Point two.....the people that live on the farm DO know where he’s buried.’

I nodded. ‘Got it. They’ll show us where, and then we’ll...you know...dig...bring him home.’

‘Probably not. Justin was attempting to shoot these people. They’re not going to give him away easily.’

I looked at the Colonel for help. He was staring at me, unblinking. Giving nothing away.

I sat up straight and said carefully, ‘So...we need to...persuade them.’

‘I’m afraid we do.’ Willoughby said quietly.

I looked at the Colonel and nodded. ‘No problem. Just like Karbala.’

‘Just like Kabala.’ he said very quietly.

Willoughby wiped his face with a white handkerchief as he said, ‘A third point to consider....’ I wondered if there was more. ‘We’ll not be welcome there.’

I wondered if he was including himself when he said “we”?

‘It could be an added bonus, that the man that shot Justine may be there. Or if not, might decide to go there once he knows someone’s come for Justin.’

Mrs Ryce-Hardin turned and looked at me then. ‘I want to see him alive. I want to ask him why he killed my son.’

Him? Who him?

Willoughby waited until he was sure she'd finished speaking before saying, 'So we'd like to bring him back here as well.'

'Okayyy.' I said, thinking hard. Don't show ignorance. Don't ask stupid questions. 'We'll need a team. The usual team, eh, sir?' I looked at the Colonel and he gave a slight nod. So I knew I was on the right track.

'Six men I would say. Plus me. Did you want to come, Mr Willoughby?'

Willoughby shook his head and waved a hand at me. 'No, no. I think I've caused enough trouble so far. Just happy to help straighten some of it out.'

Sara Ryce-Hardin was still staring at me. 'What's the name of the company you have that....you know...does the army training course and the like?'

'Sara!' I recognised the Colonels warning voice. I had to be careful.

'Just asking Charles. We need to know the truth, right? We need to know whether Mr Willoughby has his facts right. Do we not?'

The Colonel remained silent, looking down at the ornate rug on the floor.

'Fit and Fierce', ma'am.'

'Fit and Fierce.'" She mused. 'And I suppose you have a website too?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Show me, please. The computer is over there. You can work it, can't you?'

'Of course, ma'am. We also do courses on computer surveillance.'

I looked at the Colonel who was still gazing at the floor. Sara's eyes were fixed on me as I walked over to the small desk that was used to house the laptop and printer. I pressed the spacebar key, and the screen glowed into life. Someone had already logged on.

I typed in my website address. It was a few seconds while the site loaded. I looked at Willoughby, who seemed a little more relaxed now.

When it established itself I waved for Mrs RH to come over and have a look. She peered intently at the screen before saying, 'And is that it?'

Willoughby moved forward and said quietly, 'Mr Baker. I believe Mrs Ryce-Hardin would like to see the coverage you've given to her son and daughter. I believe there were some photographs? Some accreditation of excellence for the courses? The sniper one in particular?'

'Oh...that, yeah. Here...'

I quickly called up the page and there were photos of the two of them with their cups and ribbons. Large, and also fake, rifles clutched in their hands. All smiles.

‘They were brilliant, Mrs Ryce-Harden. Probably the best students I’ve ever taught.’

Mrs RH pointed to a block of text on the screen. ‘You certainly tell everyone about it, right here.’

‘You should be proud of them, ma’am.’

‘I would be.’ She turned and faced me. ‘If they were alive!’

I felt embarrassed. I didn’t know what to say. She did.

‘Because of this...’ she stabbed a thin finger at the screen. ‘...someone killed my children.’

I took in a big breath. What was she talking about?

‘Sara!’ again the warning from the Colonel.

But there was no stopping her. ‘Somebody thought this glowing report meant they were *real* assassins. Somebody dumb enough to think that, was dumb enough to do something about it.’

‘No, ma’am. You’ve got it all wrong. This was just a course. It’s not the real...’

‘Without *that* ...they’d be alive today.’

‘You can’t blame Baker, Sara.’ The colonel said quietly, but without real conviction.

‘Then who CAN I blame, then?’ she blurted out and burst into tears.

No one moved. She sat on the chair and just sobbed. I looked at the Colonel and he gently shook his head. I needed to leave.

‘I’ll go and...get things started, then.’

The Colonel nodded, and I made a quick exit. I closed the door behind me and saw Herbert standing by the front door. He nodded to me and opened the door for me.

I nodded my thanks, and he bowed his head.

I thought I heard him say softly, ‘Bring him back for us, sir.’

CHAPTER SIX

JONNY TAMM

Nick shot off like they'd called last orders. Don't know where the fuck he went. Never told anyone.

When he came back, he was all in a dither. He called me into his office and the Scotch was already out. It must have been about midday, or so. I refused a glass and sat down. Best to let him do the talking and thinking when he's like this.

I've known him for years. Muckers together in the trenches. In the brothels and now in this shit hole, he calls a training course. I don't know why I'm still here. Yes, I do. I've got nowhere else to go. No one will give me a job. A South Vietnamese, fresh out of the SAS. Who's going to trust a fucker like that with their store goods?

Nick was tapping a pencil rapidly on the desk. Always a sign he's thinking and agitated. He doesn't know what to do. Any minute now he'll condescend to tell me what's going on, pick my brains, then pretend every idea I've had that's good, has come from him.

This was taking longer than usual.

'Here's the thing.'

Here we go.

'We need the team together. We're going to some crappy farm in Hungary. Where the fuck is that, anyway?'

'Europe.' I offered. 'Eastern.'

'Whatever. We've got to persuade some country oiks to tell us where a body's buried. We've got to dig it up and bring it back.'

'How much are they payin?'' I said as a first thought.

'What? Nothing. It's for the Colonel. We're not going to charge him a cent. What the fuck's wrong with you Tam?'

'You didn't say the Colonel. You should've started by saying it's for the...'

'Shut the fuck up.'

Nicker took a long pull at the glass until it was empty. He refilled it and started tapping the pencil again. He was thinking but doing it silently.

I couldn't wait any longer. 'We need transport, Nick. Is this legit? Passports and such. Or covert?'

He was shaking his head. He said, 'And there may be another body to bring back. Alive if possible.'

'Another body? But you just said one body.....'

'I'm telling you now, another body.'

'Fuck, Nick. We can hardly use passports for that, can we? So it's covert. We'll need a plane or helicopter. Possibly some weapons as I'm assuming the live body will resist a little. Some sort of surveillance and some sort of mission parameter in case things go to shit.'

'Exactly what I was thinking.' More pencil tapping.

'This cost money, Nick. Money we don't have. Let's face it. We don't have a helicopter either. We have weapons, but no fucking ammunition to shot with them.'

'Always so negative, Tam. The Colonel will pay for everything. We just have to.....'

I waited as long as possible before I felt I had to say, 'Get a list together of what we need and get it delivered wrapped in a pink bow.'

'Comprehensive list. We don't know what trouble we'll meet.'

'When's all this supposed to happen?'

'As soon as we can. I just need to check with the Colonel before we go too far. I wished I'd stayed now. But not in the middle of a family row. God! Why me?'

He drained his glass in one and resumed tapping the pencil. The tapping noise was beginning to irritate me. I felt like snatching it from him and stabbing him with it.

I shrugged and stood up. 'I'll start on the list.'

'Yeah do that. Make yourself useful.'

'Are we closing the training ground? We'll have no one to run it?'

'Yeah for a day, or so. Say three.'

'I'll look at who we've got booked in. Not many. Cancel them and not take any bookings for aweek, say.'

'Okay.' Tap, tap, tap.

I left the portavan he calls an office and went outside. The sky was clouding over, and it looked like rain. The countryside was quiet. Our solitary training course had finished for the day. All the dude office workers went home to brag about how they were fierce SAS combat troupes for the day. Tomorrow they'd nurse their aches and pains and wished they'd never heard of Fit and Fierce.

But now the Baker Boys had another mission to run.
God knows what trouble we'll get into this time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHARLES RYCE-HARDIN

I now doubted my decision.

I'd decided after the last...debacle, that I'd get involved in no more of these hare-brained schemes of Nick Baker's. Then I realised, it wasn't his idea, but mine. Wait. Not even my idea. Now I come to think of it, it was....Willoughby's!

But I'd agreed. And now I've had a little more time to think of it, yes...it's a good idea. Both Sara and I want a final closure on Justin. If Willoughby's correct, and I will double check on that, then Justin can be brought back home to be buried on the estate.

We're now in the third week since we buried dear Naomi. Out behind the orchard, one of her favourite places. I'd like to see Justin next to her. In death as in life, always together.

Willoughby was convincing when he said we could go out and bring Justin back. But it was not as simple as that, was it? Never is! Now, ...we seem to have a small army, expensive transport arrangements, the possibility of infringing international laws about removing dead bodies and illegal trespassing on foreign land.

Dear God, where did all this shit come from?

It comes as no surprise that all this is coming out of my pocket. But it's got Nick excited and that, I suppose, worries me the most. He's not the man he once was. There were times I could brief him and let him go. Twenty-four hours later he'd be back – mission accomplished. But today....?

At least Jonny Tamm is still around to keep an eye on him. I could always trust him. Sober and sensible.

So the old team again.

My memories raced back to Bosnia, the deserts of Iraq. A brief sojourn into Afghanistan. Those really were the days. I look at the photos again with fresh eyes. Pictures, memories.

A cough behind me and Herbert was waiting. 'A Mr Willoughby here to see you, sir?'

'Show him in. Tea, please, Herbert.'

'As you wish, sir.'

Herbert left silently, and Willoughby poked his head around the door. The fellow was still unsure if he was welcome here. So was I. I had people looking into his story and waited for the results. Until then.....

‘Not disturbing you, sir?’ He said in his smooth yet irritating voice.

‘No. Please sit.’ I waved him to a chair and sat myself.

‘How’re things progressing, Mr Ryce-Hardin?’

‘How the devil would I know? Totally out of the loop, you know. You need to speak to Nick. Or better still, Tamm.’

‘Indeed. I’ve tried to contact them several times. Left a message, but no return calls.’

‘Typical.’

Willoughby gave a grunt that passes for a laugh. ‘I thought you army types were all efficient and gung-ho, let’s go.’

I stared at the idiot. ‘How old am I, Willoughby?’

‘I’ve no idea, sir. How old do you feel?’

‘Too bloody old to go running around Hungary. Too past it to organise a totally illegal incursion into a foreign land.’

‘So, no news then?’

I was short with him. Mainly because the bastard was right. I didn’t know what was happening and not being told anything by my own men. I moved to the telephone and tapped in the short dial and waited for the mobile to be answered. I watched Willoughby as he took a very slow look around the room. As if he was assessing which pieces he would like to purchase. Or even steal.

‘Tamm? Ryce-Hardin here. Yes, thank you. News? Hmmm, hmmm. Okay. Hm. Hm. Right. How much! Are you sure you...well all right if it’s....hmm. Hmm. Right. Thank you. Out.’

I took the time to get to my seat and rest in it before answering the unspoken question on Willoughby’s lips.

‘Proceeding very well. We now have a small plane and a pilot. We’ve found a way to get into Hungary, by-pass Budapest and land near this damn place, Hertzee...something....’

‘Herceghalom.’ said Willoughby smugly.

‘Yes, that’s the place. Tamm says they have the men ready, weapons nearly purchased, and an estimated take-off time of seventeen hundred, tomorrow. Bloody expensive, though.’

‘Worth it to get your boy back, though, sir.’

I wasn’t sure about that. But the creep had a point, I suppose.

Herbert shuffled in, the tray rattling with the cups and accoutrements for the afternoon cuppa. Willoughby stepped forward to help but was

brushed off by Herbert. He placed the tray on the largest of the three tables and started back for the door. Herbert gave Willoughby a glare as he passed. He shut the door behind him silently.

‘He doesn’t like to be reminded he’s getting old.’ I offered as an apology.

‘None of us do.’ Willoughby said with a smile. He moved to the tray and started to pour two cups. ‘Milk and sugar?’

‘Little and two, please. Thank you. You have manners, Willoughby. I like that.’

‘Gracious upbringing, sir.’ He finished preparing the tea and brought my cup over to me.

‘I see you like chess, sir. Lovely board you have there.’

‘Do you play?’ I asked, genuinely interested.

‘Very basic level, I’m afraid. I do enjoy a game now and again. So few people play it nowadays. Hard to get a game.’

‘I have time now, should you wish to be beaten?’ I was smiling.

I could see him weighing up the need to please me and get forgiveness for his involvement with my children’s deaths or being embarrassed at being resoundingly beaten by an expert.

‘I’d love to test our abilities on the checkered board, sir. But I fear I’d not be a worthy opponent. I fear you may be far too good and your victory somehow...hollow.’

‘Coward!’ I said with a smile.

‘Just a short game, then.’ His eyes did seem to sparkle a little. Was this man a hustler? Was I about to be resoundingly beaten by an expert?

We seated ourselves around the games table and finished our tea. He chose the piece, and I made my first move.

The game lasted nearly two hours. He was a far better player than he had led me to believe. I would have to watch this fellow. He was a smooth talker and a manipulator. But he didn’t realise how good I was with those skills either.

Time seemed to slip away gently into the evening. It was approaching mid-summer, and the air was balmy. The old windows didn’t work so well these days, but with a few doors left ajar, a breeze managed to creep through the house. Much like old Herbert.

Despite my misgivings about the man, I began to enjoy his company. He was well-read, well-educated and very knowledgeable about world politics.

His moves were always careful and calculated, but I could spot the flaws in his game and was always several moves ahead of him. I rarely get a chance to play these days. No one in the household will play me anymore. I always go out to win. For some reason that upsets some people.

Even my war games have been put on hold a while. Everything has been put on hold. Since.....

‘So you made full Colonel, then, Mr Ryce-Hardin?’

I looked to see if he was mocking me. Only a fool would not realise my rank on retirement from the forces. This man was no fool and I’m sure knew a lot more about me than I did about him. Time to change that.

‘I was too old when I went in the service. Far too old, really. But there was a lot of unrest in the world and they needed new men. Fresh meat for the grinder. I would’ve got a lot further but for the damn retirement age. Force you out like unwanted chop bones, they do. Were you in the service?’

He waved both hands at me. ‘Noooo. Not for me, I’m afraid. No good at being disciplined.’

‘No one else in your family in service, then?’

‘No. ‘Fraid not.’

‘What line of work were they in, then?’

He coughed into his white handkerchief and took his time to answer. He moved a bishop before saying, ‘It’s a little embarrassing, really. My father was a syndicated crime lord.’

‘Good God!’

‘Fraid so. Chicago, so I’m originally American.’

‘I thought there was something peculiar about your accent. I just knew it!’

‘Well spotted. The family left hurriedly, so father could avoid imprisonment in the early 1940s. He changed our family name, and we lived as Willoughbys, building up a fortune on the back of racketeering and money lending. Terrible admission to make.’

‘Interesting. So this business with...what’s it called...Blithering...?’

‘Brethren, sir.’

‘Brethren, whatever, it’s part of your legacy...?’

‘No, no, nothing to do with my family history. Nothing to do with racketeering or anything illegal at all. Bad press, I’m afraid.’

‘But you’re still under investigation, right?’

‘The Corporation called The Brethren is under investigation. I was only the President, but there are associates of the corporation, individual independent business in their own right, that’s being investigated. Because these businesses came together under the umbrella of The Brethren, the police have to take everyone as a suspect. Your move I believe, sir.’

‘Oh, yes. Of course. Knight. Check.’

‘Clever move, sir. Didn’t see that coming.’

‘So...you’re saying....you’re not involved in anything illegal and not directly under investigation.’

‘Only as President of a body that is only associated with a company that...well, to be honest...IS guilty of wrongdoing. Hence your unfortunate children.’

‘And this had nothing to do with your father and his business?’

He moved a rook as a sacrifice to the knight. ‘No. My father’s business ceased twenty years ago when he died. Violently, I’m afraid. A police marksman. I never had any interest and never took notice of what happened to the business, or the people in it.’

I moved my queen and clapped my hands together. ‘Check Mate.’

‘Well played, sir. I knew I was not worthy competition for you.’

‘I enjoyed it, none the less. Another time perhaps? Rematch?’

‘I’d be delighted.’

‘Good. Good. Now....what was it you wanted to see me about....?’

‘Progress, sir. On our project. We know what’s happening now, don’t we?’

‘Yes. Yes. We do. Right. We do.’

‘Tomorrow at seventeen hundred. Sir, shall I call tomorrow and we can both wait for progress reports?’

‘Yes. Why not? Call at seventeen hundred. By the way. Wear a different suit, will you? That’s getting...well...a gentleman ought...you know.’

‘I’d love to sir. But this is all I have.’

‘What?’

‘All I have. What I stand up in is all I own. I’ve no money. Everything is frozen. I live off fish and chips and chocolate bars.’

‘Disgraceful. I thought you were a millionaire type, chap?’

‘Was, sir. Well, still am. But can’t get at any of it until they make up their minds that I’m personally innocent.’

‘We can’t have that. Herbert! We’ll sort a room out for you. Go get your things. Be here tomorrow at seventeen hundred. Stay for a while. Until this business is....concluded.’

‘That’s most decent of you sir. I’ll do everything I can to help.’

‘Dammed right you will. Still, haven’t forgiven you for helping Justin.’

‘I felt I had no choice. Had I stood here and told you Justin died, and I DIDN’T help him. Would you feel better towards me?’

The bastard had me there. I suppose I wouldn’t. Couldn’t admit to that though. Stick to your guns, Charles.

‘Hummm. But that isn’t the case. Go on. Off with you.’

‘Thanks for the tea and the game, sir.’

‘Welcome. Herbert. See him out. I’m going for a nap.’

Herbert was waiting outside the door and led Willoughby to the front door.

I could just catch Willoughby’s comment, spoken loudly because of Herbert’s deafness.

‘I’ll make sure Justin comes home.’

PART TWO – Mission

CHAPTER EIGHT

NICK BAKER

‘What piece of crap is this?’ I spat out at Tamm.

The aircraft had once been a nice small executive jet. Bombardier Learjet 45 with a capacity for nine passengers. But now this piece of crap had the nice seats ripped out and was used for hauling cargo. Smelt like sheep to me. But it was not comfortable at all. Fucking useless Tamm.

We sat on what we could find comfortable and didn’t even have any safety harnesses. As this was a totally illegal flight anyway, I’m sure ‘Elf ’n Safety won’t be bothering us.

‘This the best you could get?’ I glared at Tamm.

He just shrugged and looked away. I’m getting the distinct impression he’s becoming disinterested in everything these days. Whatever I say seems to rile him. He never does anything I ask him to do. At least not with the cheery, positive attitude he used to have.

People change, I know that. Since we’re out of the service, I suppose our lives have become...what to call it....dull!

Gone are the days we awoke to a new day and a new set of challenges. Some days, we didn’t even know what country we’d be in that evening. Who we would have to kill. What we’d have to rescue. What we’d have to steal. The excitement was unparalleled.

That was when Colonel RH was in charge of us. We were his personal elite troupes. What we did for him....good job he was mostly autonomous. Had we ever been caught.....

But here we were again. Two years since the last mission. All the old gang back together. But the atmosphere was somehow...different. Especially with Tamm. Or was he the problem here? Was he bringing down the morale of the troupes? I’d need to keep an eye on him.

He was certainly deficient in organising this journey. The crap plane. I dread to think what weapons he had for us?

‘What do we have to work with Tamm?’ I dreaded the answer.

The look he gave me was surly. He said, ‘You don’t know?’

‘Of course, I don’t know! I gave you the order to source. Do I have to do everything myself?’

‘You don’t do ANYTHING yourself!’ That’s what I mean by negative.

He needed to be taught his place in this outfit. He never responds to verbal abuse, so I needed to kick his arse. I struggled to stand. These make-shift seats were dreadful, another Tamm disaster. I could hardly stand. The plane was moving. I decided to wait until we were on terra firma. I sat back down again.

‘So what DO we have?’ I said, not letting him get away with insubordination. I was still the boss of this outfit.

‘At short notice, very little. Deano at the ordnance store was cooperative. But his prices are sure higher than they used to be.’

‘Fuck, Deano. What’d he give you?’

I got us five SA80 and ammo.’

‘Okay. Nice rifle. Sights?’

‘Yep. SUSATs.’

‘Laser sights, no?’

‘Didn’t have any. At least not without mortgaging your mother.’

‘Cheating bastard.’ I’ve never liked that guy. Perhaps we can teach him a lesson when we get back. ‘What else, Tammo?’

‘Six Glock 17s and ammo. Two sniper rifles. Both L129A1s. For long range. Well....800 metres at least.’

‘That it?’

‘What more do you want? This is an oik farming family. They’re not the Taliban, for fuck’s sake. You didn’t say what you wanted. So be happy with what you got!’

‘I told you.....’

‘You told me fucking nothing! Twice I asked if you had a list. No, sort it out yourself, you said. I did what you asked and still, I’m fucking wrong.’

I was aware the rest to the team were now listening, and I felt Tamm was usurping my authority. Right now I wasn’t in a position to do much about it, but once we got on the ground....

‘I just hope the rest of the planning is better.’ I’d had enough argument. We were only an hour into the flight, I needed to rest. I pulled my cap over my eyes and tried to sleep. I heard Tamm muttering to himself and tried to ignore it.

There was a time when going on a mission was all excitement and camaraderie. But today, there was just silence.

I did think letting Tamm sort the mission out was a mistake. But what could I do? I had the business to run. At least the choice of men was simple. It was the usual crew. The Fabulous Baker Boys.

From under my cap, I saw them all looking relaxed. We're all dressed in stupid clothes that Tammo had chosen for us. Okay, we couldn't go in with camouflage gear or Ghillie suits. But we looked like....tramps.

I was given a dark brown corduroy trouser and rough cotton check shirt. Not even new and had stains on it. I had my own boots on, as did we all. Some compromises don't get made. We had cloth flat caps, and we hadn't shaved for nearly a week now. Scruffs, or tramps – I couldn't make up my mind.

We'd ditched the military backpacks and Bergens and now had some canvas crap that looked like it was about to fall apart. Especially as it was packed with equipment so full, it was literally coming out the top. And bloody heavy too. Too late for me to change anything. I'd make sure Tamm would take the flack if everything went shit-shaped.

What surprised me was that no one else seemed to notice these discrepancies. Normally this lot were complaining like mad. Still.... It is what it is. This wouldn't be a problematic mission, anyway. A couple of days at most and we'd be back home in our own beds.

I was aware I hadn't eaten anything for a while. I don't remember if I'd breakfast or not. I got to the airport a little late. I had to close down the business for a few days and that takes time. I wasn't exactly hungry, but I felt thirsty.

I rummaged in my backpack and pulled out a flask. I poured some into the cup and drank deeply. It felt good, I felt better. I filled the cup again and began to relax.

Two days. We'd manage that, even out of shape as we all probably were. What we lacked in fitness we made up for in experience and determination. The Baker Boys were on the roll again. But to look at them lolling with the movement of the light aircraft in turbulence, you wouldn't think these were fierce soldiers of fortune.

"Thorny" was a long streak of piss if ever you saw one. Tall, lanky and with a stupid expression always on his face. But when the chips were down, he'd be the first man standing between you and the enemy. You could trust your life to Thorny. Real name, not that it matters to anyone, is Thornton. Gary Thornton. Codename Baker 3.

Now Joe Becker over there, or "Boris" as we call him, is different. He looks more like an accountant or...computer nerd. In fact, he IS more a computer nerd. Give him a keyboard and he's a wizard. Fair receding hair shows up his high dome of a bonce. He even looks intelligent, but with his

weedy frame, you'd never guess he's a crack shot with a pistol. Codename Baker 4.

Again we have a contrast in Leroy Green. Tall muscular and black as the Ace of Spades. This is why we call him "Chocolate". Not offensive, or racist. Great at blowing things up. Sometimes unintentionally. Codename Baker 6.

Shane Quinn. The "Mighty" in our parlance. Mighty in every way. The women love him. It's said he could make a woman pregnant from another country. Big lad he is, in every way possible. Six-six and in proportion. Codename Baker 7. Good all-rounder.

Last and possibly least, Billy Waters. "Muddy". Not sure about this guy. The latest recruit to join us. The Colonel saw great possibilities with this guy, but not me. But...if the Colonel says he's in, he's in. Looks...well...ordinary. You'd pass him by on a street. But if he's carrying an AK47, you say "Sir". Code Name Baker 5.

I looked across at Tammo again. Johnny Tamm. Vietnamese, flat-faced bastard. My right-hand man. But these days.....

Met him six years ago and boy was he out of control. Well balanced guy, chip on both shoulders. Great in tight situations, though. Never seen him panic. Never seen him with a woman though. He doesn't look or act gay. But you never know....Baker 2 is his call sign. Second in command. He needs to be reminded of that occasionally.

The sight of my gallant team faded in my vision. I was just too tired to.....

The landing woke me up. I thought the plane was coming apart. We were all thrown all over the cabin. Little to hang on to. It was rough. But it was short. The bumping slowed, and we were coming to a standstill.

'Get your gear out and go.' said Tammo loudly.

I struggled to my feet shouting, 'Gear and go. Come on. Gear and go.'

The landing had jumbled everything up. I couldn't find my backpack or weapon. Mighty handed both to me with a grin. I nodded thanks, and he shoved me through the now open door. I landed with a thump, but years of reflex and training turned it into a roll. Soon I was on my feet and looking at the compass on my wrist. We were soon all on the ground and the plane's engines were revving up again. Boris shut the aircraft door and thumped three times on the fuselage for the pilot to take off. I'd be surprised if the pilot could hear that with the noise the engines made. Clapped out like the rest of the plane.

Tammo silently pointed his arm straight out and I saw from my compass we were heading straight south. That's the direction I was going to tell everyone to move in. We jogged towards the first edge of trees and

entered the sanctuary of the woods. Tammo turned back to see the Learjet bouncing across the rough field until it finally seemed to be flung in the air.

'I didn't think those things could do that! Take off from a field.' I said to no one in particular.

Tammo looked at me as if I'd farted. 'Captain Dawson's an experienced pilot. Ex-military. Can fly anything, anywhere. Let's move. We have a long rough road ahead and need to be there by dark.'

Tammo formed a fist and pointed into the woods. Silently all the team moved after him. I followed hurrying to catch him up. I hadn't had time to study the maps or any of the briefing materials we had. I needed to catch up on those quickly.

The next few hours were a nightmare. Every step of the way I cursed Tammo for not getting us here by road. A comfortable people-mover, tractor, anything but a cross-country yomp.

We crossed fields, negotiated woods and two streams. A short while on a narrow country road and a few low hills as well. We were all pretty tired by the time we came to the edge of some woods and looked out over ploughed fields.

Silently Tammo pointed at a group of buildings. We had arrived.

CHAPTER NINE

JONNY TAMM

I was annoyed we'd been involved in this shit-crazy mission.

Nicker was next to useless at getting all the info we needed to prepare. I had to go behind his back and talk with the Colonel. We both agreed it was better if Nicker didn't know everything for a while.

The Colonel put a premium on our departure and I just had to do the best I could with the arrangement. Finding the right pilot and transport was the most difficult and time-consuming. I'd heard of Dawson, from one of my old muckers a few years ago. The guy flew hooky cargos out of Iraq, Iran and sometimes Afghanistan. I thought if he could do that, he could get us in and out of non-war-torn Hungary.

Dawson had his own plane, a Learjet and was used to flying it solo, even though it was supposed to have a crew of two.

Price was another thing. Originally the Colonel thought about £100,000 for the whole project. It cost more than that for just the pilot. Equipment and weapons ran another £60,000. There were a few extra costs for Intel and the like. But nothing for us mugs putting our lives on the line. The Baker Boys would do it for the Colonel. Although we would've liked to be asked first! Anyway, ...we were committed and got to the private field in time and all equipment loaded. But where the fuck was Nicker!

My fault. I should've put someone on him. Best man scenario to get him to the plane on time. An hour late the bastard was. No excuse, but already smelling of whisky.

Dawson was getting agitated. He'd a flight plan logged with the authorities and it didn't include this stop at the small airfield in Buckinghamshire.

When Nicker drove up, we almost threw him into the plane and it took off quickly. No one wanted to speak to Nicker, in case they accidentally said what they felt. I had to talk to the bastard as he is, after all, my *superior* officer. Although we're not military anymore and a court-martial isn't a threat, we still have to have a line of authority, otherwise, we'd be more like...pirates.

It became clear he was drunk. He couldn't stand, and his speech unclear. He was drinking from a flask which didn't have coffee. When he was asleep, which he was for most of the journey, I took the flask and found a few small miniatures of booze and hid them in the plane.

As we landed he was totally confused, couldn't find his gear, or the door. Mighty helped him out, and he fell flat on his face in the grass.

The plane wanted a quick turn around and Dawson already pushing on the power as the door was shut. He did a doughnut on the grass and raced down the field getting just enough speed to rotate.

Dawson had a flight plan to Budapest. He was not registered to land first anywhere. He knew ways to avoid radar detection and had a good line in patter for the controllers and would land in Budapest late with some excuse about being lost. For the next few days, he would load a genuine cargo and get all the paperwork cleared. Register his flight plan back to England and reverse the journey to pick us up when we were ready.

I didn't spare the time to watch him disappear into the sunset; we had to move out.

The trek was tough on Nicker. At least he sobered up a little. He was exhausted by the time we got to our destination and didn't have a clue where he was.

I nodded to Muddy to send the signal back to base to say we'd arrived at our target.

The next part was probably going to be the most difficult and sensitive part of the mission. I felt Nicker was in no position to take charge of that. He was going to be pissed off, but I had to take command until he was sober. I'd agreed this with the rest of the team who promised to back me up. Distract, confuse and delay Nicker in any way from taking charge and making a damaging decision.

So we all agreed on pace and stealth. Fast moving, give Nicker no time to think. Our priorities were to secure the buildings, secure the people in them, then protect the perimeter.

It was now dark, and the sounds of the forest changed to the animals that hunted food at night. They always seem to make the scariest noise, don't they? Or is it because it's dark and you can't see them, or know exactly where they are that makes them sound scarier?

Thorny scoped the area in Infra-red and said, 'One target in the building to the east. Five in the main building. All clear.'

I pointed to Chocolate and indicated the solo occupant of the barn. With a last look at the faces of the team about to go into action, I held my arm up with a clenched fist and pointed forwards. We started to run.

The open ground was uneven and in the dark, with no moon, we could not be sure of our footing. I heard a tumble and a grunt behind me and just knew that'd be Nicker. Thorny lead the way, still wearing the Infra-red goggles. I wished we'd time to get them for all of us. We just followed him as close as possible without tripping over anything.

It took just over two minutes before we were at the main building. I looked behind and saw Chocolate ease into the door of the barn that would

be secure in a few seconds. Behind I heard panting as Nicker caught up with us. Before he could catch his breath and say anything. I waved Thorny to the right and Mighty to the left.

The rest would follow me as I quietly turned the door handle and threw open the door.

CHAPTER TEN

OLGA KOBAY

I like evenings the best.

After supper, we all sit around roaring fire and just talk to each other. We have no TV or radio. Certainly none of the Interweb. We barely have electricity, but we are working on getting generator. Mama says we can afford it now and would be good to get few kitchen “white goods” to help her out. I do not know what the white goods are. She has been reading some old magazines she found at her friend’s house.

Since getting money from Jagger we have been at a loss how to spend it. The only real purchase we made was for new tractor. Well, it is not new. Our neighbour wanted money, so we bought it from him. It is very good. We can all drive it. It has ploughing tools, a flatbed for carrying harvest. We have to have barrels of fuel, but that is all right, we store them well away from buildings.

I have learned how to drive a car! Géza has taught me. Now we are both doing teaching for Tamas and Henrik. Soon we will all be able to take car and go wherever we wish. It is exciting times for Kobay family.

We had fair share of excitement. Enough for a lifetimes, I think. For many years I was a contract killer for nasty Hungary hollgans in England. Kept as a slave and my family here in Herceghalom under threat from the hollgans, who took over the farm. It was a time I would much rather forget. But when we sit around the fire, it is mostly the main subject of conversation. Géza never tires of the stories we all have to tell. Even father, much recovered from his depression since the hollgans have gone. Even he has story to tell.

We Kobays killed all the hollgans. One by one. Me killing their leader. Shot to the head. Henrik claims he shot him. We both did. But my shot was first and certainly fatal.

Géza listens with gleam in his eyes. He says he wished he was there. He would have handled them all on his own. It is hard to tell him how evil these men were. How much hold they had over whole family. If it had not been for James, we would all be in same position now. His name is Jagger, but then we only knew him as James. Oh, yes, also Smith. He pretended to be....that’s another story.

Just the thought of Jagger makes me smile. I tried to kill him. I rarely miss, but that was most fortunate miss for me. He became my best friend and saved my family. We keep in touch, but rarely. He has life of his own now with lovely Lucie. I really like her, we got on really well. I spoke to her just last week.

She sounds happy, she deserves it. They both do. They have both given up their work to be together. Jagger, like me, a contract assassin, Lucie a...I still do not know what to call her. I think the Americans say "hooker". But that is not what she is. She is very kifinomult ...sophisticated, I think the word is.

Mama joined us from kitchen. It is where she spends most of her life. I think the white goods might be good idea after all. Papa is in his workshop. Every waking moment he spends playing with his gun collection. It makes him happy. What else is there to say?

Géza and I curl up on the smaller of the two couches. We are going to be married very soon. I am not sure what that will be like. He is the only boy I have ever kissed. It is not easy to kiss Géza. He is over two metres tall and broad shoulders. It is him that has to kiss me. I think he likes kissing me. We both do. But his huge bushy beard tickles.

Tamas and Henrik, my brothers, like him a lot. He has no brothers, or sisters. He is already part of the family. When we marry, we will live here. We are building small extension to the house just for us. Until then he has his own bedroom and I have my old bedroom back again.

We are all very happy family. So much different from few months ago.

I did not hear the door open, but Mama saw it. Expecting Papa she was ready to smile, and I saw her face drop. I turned from Géza's shoulder and my heart nearly stopped.

Hollgans!

I felt the cold fear ripple through my body. Nobody moved.

A man stood in doorway dressed like local farmer. But he held rifle, and it was pointed at everyone in room. It never stopped moving. The man was not tall and had very....I do not know, I have never seen anyone like him before. He had light brown skin. A very flat face and his eyes were almost like slits. He looked evil. He said nothing as he stepped into room.

Suddenly there were more of them. They came from the front door and kitchen door. All with rifles, all looking intently at us sitting in our chairs. There was silence.

I felt Géza start to rise, but I held him back. He looked at me with such a puzzled look. I slowly shook my head and tightened my grip on his arm. He has never been in this situation and I have.

The leader pointed his arm up the stairs and two of his men ran silently and quickly upstairs. They searched every room and said, "Clear" each time. The two men stood on our small balcony that ran around main room. They were silently watching us, their rifles swinging slowly from one target to another.

Another man walked into the room through the front door, his rifle was still slung over his shoulder. He looked out of breath and tired. He moved and sat in the nearest chair by the door and pulled a pistol from its holster on his belt. He held it in both hands while he got his breath back.

No one moved or said anything.

‘Anyone speak English?’ The flat-faced leader said. I stood up quickly before my brother or my mother could. I wanted to be their target, not my family.

‘Some. A little.’ I said, putting extra fear in my voice. I had seen Jagger pretend to be somebody else. Acting, I think it is called. You can “confuse and confound” your enemies, Jagger had said. Misdirection was another tool he was fond of using.

‘Anyone else in the house?’ The voice was sharp, but not angry.

‘No.’

‘Anyone else outside?’

I could see one of the men had an Infra-red set of goggles hanging around his neck. I knew they might have been watching for some time and would know exactly who was where.

‘Just my papa. Out in his workshop.’ I helpfully pointed in the right direction.

‘Sit!’ The command was harsh. I sat.

‘Nyugodjon,’ I said loudly. I looked at the leader and said, ‘I have just told my family to stay calm. I hope that is all right?’

He nodded and swept the room again. His eyes settled on the seated member of his hollgans. The thought just struck me. If they were hollgans why are they speaking English?

‘What you want?’ I said quietly and calmly. Show as little threat as possible.

‘Justin Ryce-Hardin.’ The man from the chair spoke. His eyes came up to meet mine, and I saw an intensity there that sent a chill through me.

‘Who? I not know the name.’

He stood unsteadily, but his breathing was normal now. He walked over to me and I saw a movement from the couch. I waved my hand to tell Géza to stay seated. ‘Nyugodjon, Géza.’ I said.

The hollgan pushed his face into mine and I could smell alcohol on his breath. ‘Olga Kobay. You don’t look like a fucking killer to me. But you DO know Justin Ryce-Hardin and he’s buried around here somewhere. Now, where is he?’

The man who was trying to kill us! The man Jagger shot and killed. The man my brothers buried in the woods. Yes, I did know the man. But not his name. Jagger said no one would come for him. He said it was all over. No, it was not.

‘We don’t have time to piss about. Where’s he buried?’

Mama asked quietly what they wanted. I answered in English. We did not want to make these men angry. The room was silent. ‘They want the man who tried to kill us, Mama.’

‘Let them have him.’ Her reply was in English and she sounded calm. I looked at her and she held my stare. We both knew we had to be calm to get through this. If that’s all they wanted.....

I looked into the eyes of man who I now thought might be real leader and said, ‘My brothers will take you to him. Take him and go.’

His smile looked cruel. But he turned his head away from me to look at the flat-faced man. ‘See, Tammo. How easy was that?’ The man called Tammo nodded, but kept his eyes moving around the room. ‘Tomorrow, when it’s light, we’ll go and dig him up.’

The front door opened again and my papa shuffled in. He was followed by a tall black man. Almost as big as Géza. I could see by his head hanging that papa had quickly reverted to broken man he had been under first lot of holligans. This was a blow to him. To all of us.

‘Papa!’ Mama rushed to him. No one tried to stop her. She led him to his favourite chair.

I now counted seven men. All dressed like local farmers. All armed with same rifles. All had backpacks, and some carried what looked like two more rifles. They were more for sniper work, I guessed. As a sniper myself, I could see design suited that purpose.

‘He looks like he could do with a drink.’ The leader said pointing to papa.

‘I will get water.’ Henrik said, standing.

‘Water? That’s no good. Brandy. Any brandy?’

I shook my head and took a chance. ‘No alcohol here. No one likes to drink.’ The leader’s eyes narrowed, and he moved towards me. I could see out of the corner of my eye the one called Tammo started to move towards me too. Had I made a mistake?

‘Sir?’ Tammo said. ‘We need to set a perimeter guard. Who shall I send?’

Sir eyed me a while longer then said, ‘Are you sure? No alcohol? No...apple juice, distilled anywhere?’ I shook my head. ‘I thought you

Europeans were hopped up on schnapps and stuff...wine...any wine?' Again I shook my head.

'Sir? The perimeter?'

'You choose.'

'You're our leader, sir. The honour goes to you.'

'Thorny and Muddy take shifts for perimeter. The rest shifts in here until morning.' His voice seemed sharper, more distinct now. His eyes seem to focus as well. Something had changed in him. I now felt more afraid.

I saw Tammo wave at two of the men who quickly walked out door and closed it quietly behind them. So far only leader and Tammo had spoken. I looked at others. The tall black man was looking at my brothers, never taking his eyes of them. The smaller one of the group looked down intently at my mother from balcony and watched her every move. The other large man in the group was standing on balcony and seemed to be watching me. Intently. He had a half smile on his face I didn't like. Géza had noticed him too.

'Sit.' The one called Tammo said and motioned me and Mama to chairs. I moved to join Géza and Tammo waved me away to another chair. I could see Géza's face cloud over. I smiled at him and nodded everything was okay. He seemed to settle.

I noticed Tammo was carefully watching the leader, all the time. 'Sir?'

The leader swung his head round to see who had spoken as if from a dream. 'Right, Tammo. First things first. Feed the troupes. You.' He pointed to Mama who looked up in surprise. 'Get some food and drink for the men. Chocolate go with her.'

He turned back to me and said, 'You, Olga the trigger lady. Where can I find The Magician?'

My mind wanted to shut down. To pretend none of this was happening. But I knew it would not go away. I now knew why they were here. There would only be one end from two possibilities to this.

What would Jagger do? The Magician they had said, the infamous hitman. They did not know his real name. What would he do if he was me? Misdirection. Trickery. But I was not him. I do not know enough. But he would have the answers. An idea was forming, and I took my time to think it through.

'Where is he?' The tone of his voice harsher.

'I do not know.'

'Well, you'd better. Or...your big ugly friend there will suffer. Tammo!'

The man called Tammo moved quickly to couch and struck Géza on head with his rifle butt. He cried out in pain and slid off the couch, holding his head.

‘NO!’ I shouted, instantly on my feet. I allowed my face to show fear, but inside I had new idea. Keeping Jagger in my mind I thought quickly. I would have to give this information. But I wanted to remain in control on HOW I gave the information.

‘Do not harm him!’ I said on verge of the panic.

‘So where is The Magician, then?’ The cruel snarl was back on the leader’s face.

‘Okay. I will tell.’ I looked dejected and hung my head.

‘Olga?’ Mama said with concern in her voice.

‘Meg canno tenni.’ said Henrik.

‘I must do this.’ I said looking hard at them. They knew me well enough to interpret the look. I hoped.

I held the silence as long as I could. Finally, ‘Where is he?’ from the leader.

‘I do not know.’

The leader nodded to Tammo , who moved towards Géza.

‘But I think I can contact him. I will tell him you want to meet with him.’

‘That’s more like it. Now, do it.’

‘Now?’ I said innocently.

‘Right now. Tammo gets impatient, don’t you Tammo. Until he’s been fed he’sunreliable. Aint that right, Tammo?’

‘Yes, sir. Unreliable. That’s me.’

I shrugged and said, ‘I can only call him once in a while. I don’t know if he will answer.’

‘Then we’ll see, won’t we? Call him. Now!’ The leader was losing patience.

I had taken it almost as far as I could. All time I was thinking of what to say, how I could say it.

‘I can’t remember the number....’

‘Tammo!’

‘All right. I have it here.’ I walked over to the dresser we have in the room and pulled out a piece of paper. The number Jagger had given me was

for one year only. After that, we did not know where any of us would be. But he had said call in emergency.

I ran through in my mind what to say. I had to be careful. I had to warn him, but not let hollgans think I was warning him.

‘Which phone do you use?’ Tammo said.

I walked back to the drawer and took out my mobile, bought for me by Jagger at the airport before we left London. That seemed so very long ago now. I turned it on. I had not used it for a while and wondered if there was any battery left. It beeped a couple of times and sing-song tune played. I have always loved that tune. It always reminded me of Jagger.

When it was ready, I looked at the leader. He nodded and moved close to me to see what I was doing. I tapped in the number and pressed the go button. He took the phone from me and pressed another button. Now we could all hear the ringing tones.

I held my breath and rehearsed my first line as the tones continued. There was a click and then Jagger’s voice. ‘Leave a message.’

The leader was glaring at me. Tammo moved one step nearer Géza, who was struggling to sit back on the couch. His hands were covered in blood. I looked at Mama and she knew I meant for her to look at the wound. But for now, we all stood still.

I took a deep breath and said, ‘Magic Man. It’s Olga. You said only to call in emergency. Well...this is. Call me back, please.’ I pressed the end call key and looked at the leader.

‘How long before he calls back?’ said the leader.

I shrugged. ‘Sometimes within the hour. Sometimes, days. We do not call often.’

‘So we wait.’

It was several hours later that the call came.

We all had a decent meal. The hollgans were very polite and accepted their food and drink with grace. They thanked Mama for her efforts. But they never stopped watching us. Their guns ever pointing.

As the call sounded, the gang were suddenly more alert. The leader who they called Nicker, was at my side and held his ear next to mine so he could hear everything from both sides. Tammo stood near Géza again, his head was now bandaged by Mama. The one they called Chocolate moved nearer Mama. The one called Boris watched my brothers, and the one called Mighty was still watching me.

‘Hello?’ I said quietly.

‘Hello.’ Jagger said.

‘Magic Man. How nice to hear your voice again.’

‘How is everything?’ He said, already knowing there was a problem. I had to try to tell him what the real problem was.

‘Fine. Andrés send his regards and looks forward to meeting you again.’ I hoped the reference to one of the hollgans we killed made Jagger think that hollgans had returned.

‘Good. How are his brothers?’

‘Oh, they are fine.’ I was thinking. What did he mean by that? Did Andrés have any brothers? Only the other hollgans.... ‘All seven of them. Growing up now. Hunting with big guns.’

I hoped that told him there were seven hollgans with guns.

‘I look forward to meeting them. When can I come and visit?’

‘Just a day, would be good.’ I hoped he would see that as the time they had been there already.

‘I’m in Columbia at the moment. On holiday would you believe? I can be there in about...three days?’

‘That will have to do.’ I looked at Nicker who was shaking his head. He mimed the word, “sooner”, which I did not understand until he had to whisper it.

‘Sooner if you can.’ I said after a delay that seemed forever.

‘Problem there. Where I’m staying is miles away from anything. You must come some day. Get you away from the farm for a bit. The boys too. It has to be three days, I’m afraid. I’ll call when I know I’ll be landing.’

‘Yes.’ I said trying not to show my relief. I think Jagger understood my message. But we had to wait three days.

‘Passed my test now.’ He knew that.

‘Congratulations. I don’t want you to drive, though. I’ll get a taxi from the airport. Must dash. Look forward to seeing you in a few days. Love to all.’

The phone went silent.

I looked around at everyone to see the different looks on their faces. For the Kobays the wait would seem like a year. For the hollgans, for that is what I still think they are, it was what they were ready for. For the big one with smirky smile, it didn’t look long enough.

He never took his eyes off me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NICKER

Once we got over the first day, it was all plain sailing. We'd accomplished what we'd come to do. Nearly.

The next morning we were taken to the woods and the tall lad showed us where they'd buried Justin. It was a very basic grave. The bastards hadn't wrapped the body in a sheet, or anything.

It was heavily decomposed, and we had to use plastic bags we'd brought with us to contain the remains. We strapped the whole thing to a stiff wooden board and carried it back to the farm. We left Justin in one of the outhouses, the workshop I think they called it and threw a tarpaulin over him out of respect.

I knew the shift work would be the thing the men hated the most. Boredom, mostly. After action you always get a reaction. If you had nothing to do that reaction could be negative. I had to give the men something to do, other than guard some country yokels.

We started by doing a thorough search of all the buildings. You never know what you might find. Some forgotten equipment. Old cider jars, anything. The surprise was, Muddy found a hoard of weapons. The old man's we think. He must have been working on one when we arrived. Chocolate had scared the shit out of him by appearing out of the gloom, with his black face and kick-ass rifle. The old man nearly passed away on the spot. Hasn't said a word since.

I know what boredom can do to men away from home. Away from women and loved ones. I know this was only going to be a few days, but it was a long way from home for them. I know it's only Tammo and me that aren't married. Oh yeah, and Mighty. Although he has so many women it's hard to keep track. He was also a potential problem. I saw the way he looked at the Kobay woman. He hadn't had skirt for a few days and he gets cranky. I pulled him aside.

'They're all hostages and to be treated properly. When we don't need them as hostages, and when we go, THEN you can do what you like with them. But bury the evidence.'

He seemed to understand, but patience wasn't his strong point. I added, 'We might need her whole for when The Magician, stupid name, comes. We might need her to lure him in. I understand he's a very tricky customer. Willoughby should know. And watch the big boyfriend. I don't want trouble, Mighty. Okay?'

He again reluctantly agreed.

We all took it in turns to go hunting with the two brothers. They were excellent shots as it turned out. We only handed them their rifles when game was to be had and handed out the ammo like it was diamonds.

But we showed them up when it came to marksmanship. Our rifles were far superior, and we could put six bullets into the head of a deer before they'd reloaded their second. It made a mess of the deer, but we still ate well.

I got Chocolate to put screws and nails into all the upstairs windows of the bedrooms. At night, we had two men on guard in the main room. Between the guards and the screws, no one was getting out.

During the day, each Baker Boy was assigned a person to guard, watched every second of the day. Willoughby said these could be a problematic family. So far they'd been fucking docile.

But we were all waiting for the main event. The arrival of the so-called Magician. What a stupid, fucking name. Some kind of hotshot killer. Sniper extraordinaire.

Even that was too easy. The Olga woman didn't hold out as long as I thought she might. Country dumbbells.

I too was feeling the boredom. I didn't miss a drink or smoke. I somehow managed to lose all that on the way over. I still had a little stash which I keep on me, but that was running out.

One more day to go.

Some hero this magic guy. Kills the Ryce-Hardin twins and then runs and hides. Colombia, for Christ's sake. Fucking coward. The Colonel wants him alive, which is a pity. Can't wait to meet him.

The Magician called Kobay late in the evening. She was quiet and pretended to be pleased to hear from him. The call was short because he was in a hurry. His plane was due to land at 13:50 the following afternoon. I made the winding up signal, and she said her goodbyes.

She was very sullen for the whole of the evening. It brought the whole tone down for everyone. The evening meal was almost silent. The family all decided to go to bed early. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, so I decided to turn in as well. I made sure that Mighty was not on duty. I didn't want him taking the last opportunity to nail the skinny Hungarian bitch and screw everything up.

The next day was bright and sunny and everyone was up early for breakfast. The Kobays were still depressed, but I'm sure would be glad to see the back of us. But they must feel something for this Magician guy. God knows what. He sounds like a prat to me.

We decided to leave early for the airport. It would take just over an hour, but we needed to park, find the gate and locate our man. We needed

to sneak in some weapons and so stayed in the disguise, the local rubbishy garb. Big pockets hiding the smaller of our pistols. We wouldn't be going through any security checks, so we'd be fine if we didn't do anything to attract attention. Tammo and me would be going and taking Olga to make the positive identification. Even Willoughby didn't know what the bloke looked like.

We used the newer of their two cars as it had the most petrol in. And didn't look like it would break down easily.

I took a last look around the farm and checked how it was set up. On the roof of the main house was Mighty. At the back of the house, just hidden out of sight was Muddy. In the cattle barn, I put Chocolate. In the workshop I put Boris. Thorny was stationed in the house. I'd radio when we were returning. This was all unnecessary precaution, I was sure. But you never know.

I knew that as soon as we drove away, they'd all leave their positions and only return to them when I called in. So I left them with a threat. I asked the Kobay family to let me know which of my men had left their positions in my absence.

Tammo wanted to drive and said he knew the way, had studied the maps and Intel. I put Olga Kobay in the front seat where I could keep an eye on her. She was wearing a bright yellow dress, so Magic boy couldn't miss her.

We left just after eleven hundred and drove towards Budapest.

Wherever that fucking was!

The BA flight BA0866 from London had landed.

When the idiot Tammo suggested these clothes would not look out of place in an international airport, I thought he was fucking Upminster, several stops past Barking. When we got there, I realised he was right.

Olga stood out. She was quite a nice-looking girl, now I could see her properly. Too thin, but very attractive. I could see why Mighty was interested. He would have to wait. We wanted The Magician first.

We waited an hour. The passengers had dried up, he was not there. I'm always thinking ahead, so I'd brought Olga's mobile phone and told her to call him. I listened in until the short sharp voice said, 'Leave a message.'

I nodded for her to speak. 'Magician. Where are you? We...I'm waiting at the gate. Call back, please.'

I took the phone from her and cancelled the call.

‘We wait a while longer. Olga, go to the information desk and put a call out for Magic Man in English.’ I motioned Tammo to go with her. It took half an hour before I heard the announcement. It called for a magician to come to the information desk.

I looked at Tammo, ‘What sort of fucking announcement is that?’

‘What else do we call him? That’s what she calls him! No one knows his name. Not even his friendly locals.’

I shook my head in disbelief. ‘Let’s grab a beer and wait a little longer.’ I said.

Tammo shook his head. ‘We’ve waited long enough. I’ll check in with the boys. We need to go outside, the military radio will look suspicious inside an airport.’

He made sense, so we went outside and stood in the warm sunshine. He made the call.

‘Baker two. Over.’

He repeated the call a few times until there was a click. ‘Baker 5. Over.’

‘Sit rep.’

‘All clear.’

‘Repeat?’ Tammo was screwing his face up.

‘All clear.’

‘Baker 2 starting evac. ETA two hours. No cargo. Repeat, no cargo. Over.’

‘Baker 5, understood and out.’

I felt deflated. ‘Fucking awful reception. But all clear. Let’s go. He’s missed the flight. Leave the phone on. See if he calls. We can come back and get him then. I’m hungry. Mama’s cooking, eh, Olga? Nothing to fucking beat it.’

We drove back in silence. I was annoyed, but not worried. These things happen. I just hated the delay. In a few hours, we might be driving back down here.

‘When we get back, Tammo. Check when the next flight’s due in.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Olga sat in the seat with a forlorn look on her face. I think she’d been looking forward to seeing her friend. Even though she must know something unpleasant was planned for him. We certainly hadn’t behaved like fucking angels.

The trip back was dire. The roads were crap and the entrance to the farmhouse appalling. A few army engineers would soon sort that road out. Make it at least drivable. The car stopped in a cloud of dust and we got out. I helped Olga out of the car as she seemed in such a daze. I looked up to the roof and could see the huge form of Mighty, he waved, and I waved back. Stupid bastard had the huge Infra-red goggles on. In the daylight! I looked around for the others but couldn't see them. I'd soon know if the bastards had left their posts.

Tammo opened the door for Olga and we all went inside. It was frustrating to be messed about by the stupid fucker with a stupid name.

As I looked up, I could see the Kobay family all sitting in their usual seats waiting for their friend to arrive. It made me grin, the stupid yokels.

Then I stopped smiling. They were all staring at me.

They were all smiling. At me!

CHAPTER TWELVE

LUCIE GILCHRIST

Never in a million years did I think I'd ever get married. I'm part of the essential social services industry – I'm not supposed to get married!

My profession provides the things men want that their wives can't or won't provide. Sometimes, of course, there are wives whose husbands can't, or won't, provide the satisfaction *they* need. Men mostly can't, in my experience.

But here I am married, with my third name. From Ackroyd to Dern. From Dern to Gilchrist. Pronounced Gil crist, as Jagger would say. Not that he says a lot, anyway. Strong silent type, mostly. That can be very annoying.

But he's got a heart of gold, and ice too. I've seen him cold and calculating and I know he's taken the lives of many people. As a contract killer, I guess that's part of the job. After all, he got rid of my pimp Rico – oh how I hate that word –and changed my life forever. Then proposed to me and changed my life again.

But that's all irrelevant when I fully realised what being a retired hitman was really all about.

Hiding.

He said he needed to be in hiding for the rest of his life. I persuaded him to try it for five years. It's only been a few months, and it's driving me crazy!

Okay, ...we've got this delightful spread in Clanfield, Hampshire. Easy access to Portsmouth for shopping. But every time he goes in there, he wears a disguise. Can you imagine doing that every time you go out of your house?

Sure, we're pretty much self-sufficient. But it's fucking hard work. Planting tending and everything that goes with growing your own. And that's only been the first few months. What'll I be like after five years....!

Me....I now slop around the house in a tracksuit! Wouldn't dream of that when I was a working girl. Had to look smart all the time. But with all this....farm work, the nails get ruined; the hair goes and the face....well let's not talk about the face.

It's a large estate. Has an orchard, some woodlands and a little cute stream. Isolated up on the top of a hill, one road in, the same road out. Jagger and his obsession with security.

We both fell in love with it straight away. I was surprised to find out that Jagger had his eyes on it for a long time. Then shocked to find out that

he'd bought it a year before. He wanted me to like it for what it was – our choice.

So I got to furnish it. Well...refurnish it. The stuff that was in there....

That was fun. We went to Southampton and Portsmouth for the shopping. In disguise, of course. He's grown his hair naturally long. Has a full beard and wears sunglasses, or tinted specs. He sometimes wears lifts in his shoes. The few people who have ever met him with a disguise, especially people that he's threatened in some way, would still recognise him. He believes this. Dressed like that – *I don't recognise him!*

There is an awkwardness when saying we'd collect the furniture ourselves. Jagger not wanting ANYONE to visit the farm, not even a once-off delivery van. Not even friends! Not that we have any friends! I don't even know the neighbours yet.

As it got further into my annoying range, I was starting to nag. A wife of a few weeks and nagging already. He's easy to nag, though. He doesn't argue, answer back, or get angry. Annoying, right?

Many times he's patiently explained that there's a certain "element" of people around who'd like to get their hands on him. To kill him, to put it bluntly. So I said, 'Why don't you just go and kill them? It's what you're good at!'

He looks like a lost boy when his ethics are questioned. He feels he can't adequately explain them to me. Yes, I understand every contract he's undertaken has been against bad people. People who deserve to be put down. But for some reason, these "elements" do not fit that category. However, I'm sure if they do attack him, their status will change. From alive to dead. Watch out nasty, "elements".

I do enjoy the countryside though. Living in London all my life, the dirty and noisy streets are all I've known. Until Rico disappeared.

We're kept busy. Looking after future food supplies. Trying to have a small pretty garden around the house. Tending orchards. Fences need fixing. Farmer Giles he isn't and I'm not Farmer Giles's wife, either.

We were lying together the other morning after a burst of passion, which took me by surprise. I rose to the occasion, of course, consummate professional. And both feeling a little sleepy.

When he said, 'Do you miss anything from your past life?'

Interesting question. Loads of things. Where do I start? Then I realised he was leading up to something else. I had to be careful. This was the man I loved. The last thing I would ever do was make him do something just for me. It was OUR lives together. My needs were not the most important.

'I'd like our house to be even more comfortable.' I said it with a smile and rolled over on top of him. He likes that.

'It's more comfortable than Olga's house in Hungary. I can assure you of that.' He said as if serious.

'Yeah, well I wouldn't want to live there either. Furniture. Lots more nice soft furniture. Modern kitchen, maybe.'

'We can do that. We can afford it. You choose, and I'll pick it up.'

'Okay.' I rolled back off.

There was a long pause before he said, 'Anything else?'

I left another pause. He says little but sees a lot. He's picked up on something. Something I've said or done. Something I haven't said or done. I had to say it and knew I'd regret it but blurted it out, anyway. 'I'm lonely here, sweetie. I'm used to...people ...being around..... in the street. I feel...isolated. Sorry.'

He was thinking.

'Right.' He said raising himself up on one elbow and kissing me hard on the lips. 'We'll get a second home in a town. When the country gets you down, we can move to the town. How does that sound?'

I kissed him back. 'What about...you know...disguises?'

'Okay. How about? In the beginning....we use some sort of disguise and a new identity in the town only?'

I nodded. This was a step in the right direction. I wasn't going to ask for more from him. 'Do I get to choose the house, or do you want to look too and spoil everything?' He laughed and hugged me.

There have been few times in my life when somebody hugging me has meant so much. I felt safe and secure. And loved. It was a first for me.

Two days later came the telephone call that changed everything.

Again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JAGGER GILCHRIST

I love my new life.

From the first time I met Lucie I knew she was the only woman that could have any place in my life. If at all, I would've expected the classical beauty of the girl next door, than a drop-dead gorgeous bombshell.

In my line of work, relationships are a no-go area. Many reasons. Most of them obvious. So a flirtation was all I was looking for with Lucie. She, as a professional, could make any contact look like a raging love affair. Which made it all the harder to find out what she *really* thought of me. I was a client and had to be wooed and cosseted. But as a human being outside her industry – what did she really think of me?

None of this became relevant until I decided to retire. When the solids hit the fan, everything went pear-shaped. And banana-shaped. Any fruit reference will do. For an assassin to be the target of a hit was a surprise. I'm sure it's happened to others in the past. But to me, it was still a surprise. To have the hitman miss me and then find out it was a woman! This was even more surprising. The biggest surprise of all being, to find myself helping her out of all her problems and saving her family from Twenty-First-century slavery.

After a few more professional bumps along the road of life, we came to a situation where I could finally draw a deep breath and plan a future. All that over with, peace could enter my life and my retirement could begin properly. Lucie *did* have more than professional feelings for me. A lot more as it turned out. We decided to get married quickly. I didn't want her to change her mind. She told me afterwards; she didn't want me to change mine.

I was delighted she liked the farm. I fell in love with it ages ago and knew that's where I could live happily. She thought so too, so that's what we're doing.

Until the phone call.

I recognised Olga's voice immediately, along with the number that appeared on the screen. As soon as she mentioned Magic Man, I knew something was wrong. I was no longer The Magician. Never intended to be again. She knew that.

Olga was a contractor for seven years. She'd been in the business of having to look out for herself, taking nothing for granted and observing everything. In our business, attention to detail could be life, death, or liberty.

Mentioning the dead thug András as if he was a friend of mine gave me the suspicion that the holligans had returned. Luca was dead, he was their boss. Were these related, muscling in on Luca territory? I needed to know more. I hoped to give her the opportunity to tell me how many would be extremely useful. When she said András had seven brothers I knew what number she was dealing with. The hunting with guns confirmed they were gangsters of some sort. Hungary rural areas have many factions and gangs.

I assumed she wanted me within a day meant that's how long they'd been there. I heard somebody whispering "Sooner" near her. I felt fear for her and her family. The only consolation was that they wanted me to be there. If they wanted me, they would not harm the family. Too much.

I think Olga mentioned passing her test which was something I knew and felt particularly delighted with. I had to assume it was an additional clue meaning the opposite. That she was not able to leave the farm. They were being held prisoners. I said my goodbyes as casually as I could.

I'd said I was in Colombia to buy me some time. They could expect me in three days and have to hang about getting bored and careless. I aimed to be there within 24 hours.

I put the phone down and wondered how I was going to tell Lucie.

I took a scheduled flight from Heathrow to Budapest and hired a car. It all took longer than I wanted. But by the same evening, I was walking through the woods where Justin once hiked to get into the kill zone for Olga and Henrik.

Just a few short months ago I'd tracked him on my own. This, to put an end to the obsession some people were having of killing me, Olga and also her brother Henrik. I'd hoped it was all over. I assumed it would be. But now someone wanted me, but for what reason?

Once again, for the third time, I was entering the viper's nest without any weapons, or ammunition. The good thing about facing dangerous armed men is – that once disarmed, I became the dangerous armed man.

One thing I'd brought in the hand luggage was a good pair of binoculars. They didn't have night sight but were better than my ordinary eyesight.

I waited until dark and watched the main house.

I could see men walking around holding rifles. Olga had said seven in all. I noted every man I saw and tried to form a definitive picture of each individual in my head. There was a tall thin one, a black one. A short weedy one. One that looked Asian. A big burly man. There are two others that did not look distinctive at range.

I stayed at the edge of the woods and decided to wait the night out there. I'd some food and water and a thermal blanket. I would survive. I had two days spare, I needed to make the most of them.

At about three in the morning, the pacing around the house slowed down. I was now sure these men were not watching any of the outhouses, just the main farmhouse. I decided to investigate.

It took me until near dawn before I could move into a position where I could slip into Olga's father László's workshop. I knew he'd a hidden arsenal of weapons in there along with ammunition. I felt naked and exposed without any.

Once inside it was very dark, and I felt my way from the memory of when I was there before. We'd been preparing to attack the gangsters that were holding the Kobay family to ransom. Olga was forced to be an asset, or the family suffered. Just thinking about it raised my blood pressure.

I reached the wall where the hidden guns were hidden and stared in disbelief. The wooden covering was gone, and the shelves were empty. The gangsters had found and removed the weapons. Where had they put them? Under guard no doubt. But where? I'd have to do this the difficult way - quietly.

I eased out the door and headed back to the edge of the woods. Daylight was coming, so I had to take the risk and hurry. Fortunately, the guards were not efficient and regular, I made it undiscovered. As the morning warmed up, I saw movement around the house.

I watched as three of the intruders marched Tamas and Henrik into the woods to the east. I heard gunfire and the sound of automatic weapons. Several hours later they came back carrying a variety of kill. They would eat well tonight. I wouldn't.

I had one more day to do my surveillance. Then I needed to have a good plan.

I felt for the Kobay household. This was almost a replica of the eight years they had under the tyranny of Luca and his holligans. All dead now, but their memory must be living on in the family's minds right now.

I was sure Mama cooked for them and the rest of the family acted as slaves, running around after their every wish. I wished I could get nearer. This evening, I'd give it a try. But from a different direction.

I waited until dusk and made my way south out of the woods and walked clockwise along the path that leads to the entrance to the farm. I waited until dark to cross that open patch and moved towards the house from the north. Towards the back of the house which had trees right up to its outhouse.

I tried to make sense of the sentry pattern and couldn't. They weren't patrolling against me, I wasn't due until the following day. They must be there to keep the Kobays inside. I wanted to see inside but knew it was pointless, if they were all in bed.

All I could establish was how heavily armed these guards were. They had side arms, knives I'm sure and SA80 rifles. Not too heavily armed.

I needed a good vantage point for the following day. I circled around the woods to the north and reached where the woods petered out into the ploughed fields of the Kobay homestead to the east. I could remain hidden and still see the front of the farmhouse. It would have to do.

Later on that evening I took out my new mobile phone. The salesman assured me it'd work anywhere in the world. He'd never been to Hungary, obviously. However, I did get a signal and dialled Olga's mobile number. I kept the call brief and told them my plane arrived at 13:50. I repeated not to pick me up. I still wasn't sure if these thugs were going to send me a welcoming committee, or not. I hoped they were. A few less to deal with. They'd need to know exactly where I was at all times.

I spent another uncomfortable night in the woods and was awake at the first sounds of birdsong. I used the woods as a toilet and felt a little better. I could do with a hot meal. If all went well, Mama's food would do the trick. Something to look forward to.

I assumed they'd leave a good few hours before the plane was due. With some of these country roads, you never know what could block them. As they didn't know me, I assumed they needed to take somebody from the family with them to identify me. A two-man detail, I thought. Three, or four if I was lucky.

There were two cars parked outside, and I assumed they'd use one of them. I'd seen no sign of any vehicle they could've arrived in.

They certainly looked like a military team of some sort. From what I could see, they were not young enough to be currently serving. But these days....So, mercenaries then. Certainly hired in for the mission. But by whom? That was my overriding question. What did they want with me and how did they know to get to me through the Kobay family? Olga in particular.

Today I'd find out or die trying. I'd no intention of dying, but my mood right now dictated that somebody was going to.

I rested and tried to relax as much as possible. When I could, when there was no one around to accidentally see me, I tried stretching exercises. I wanted to stay sharp and nimble. But most of all invisible.

From my meagre backpack, I removed a few items of camouflaged clothing I'd brought with me. They were neutral designs, so would blend in with the rural environment. I pulled a balaclava over my head and left just

my eyes showing up in the midst of all the greenery and wooden buildings. I checked my watch. Three hours before touch-down. They needed to leave soon.

There was a flurry of movement, and one of the team was ordering the others around. I took a good look at him and saw no distinguishing features. Ordinary looking man. Just under six feet. Deep voice. Abrupt movements.

I saw the big bulky guy climbing onto the farmhouse roof. Good all-round position. He was facing away from me and was not looking at the rear of the farmhouse. That's when I decided on my strategy.

I eased myself towards the rear of the farmhouse. I could no longer see the front, but I needed to get into the house from the rear as soon as I was able.

Then I had to change my mind because one of the men was coming out of the kitchen and settling down at the rear of the house. He was the other of the ordinary-looking guys. Didn't fit the pattern of a mercenary, so I guessed a specialist in something. He looked more like a farmer than an insurgent troupier. He was ten metres away from me. I froze and slowly lowered myself into the undergrowth. Was he there permanently, or doing something temporary?

I just had to wait.

I heard a car start up and move away. I'd no idea where the rest of the guards were. I had sight of two only. The one on the roof with his back to me, the ordinary one outside the back door who was sitting on a log and picking at his fingernails. His weapon rested against another tree stump. He looked bored and indifferent. It was time to put him out of his misery.

As he was only a few metres away from the man on the roof, it had to be silent. I slid out my throwing knife and held it ready. Even if I had a handgun, I couldn't use it yet. I started to move, very slowly towards him.

There was a patch of ground two metres from the last bit of cover to the man on the log. I had to time this right.

I saw his head slump, fatigue getting to him, along with several days of inactivity. I moved silently forward, knife held ready to throw.

Two metres. One metre.

I grabbed his mouth and nose with my hand and squeezed. He reacted quickly, but my knife had already severed his vocal cords and his artery was draining the life out of him. His struggles lasted a few seconds. I eased him to the ground while looking up at the man on the roof. He hadn't moved.

It had all happened silently. I searched him quickly and found a Glock 17 and a spare clip of ammo. He had an SAS knife in his boot and I took that too.

Quietly, I sat him up, with his back against the log. Wiped my knife on his clothing and slipped it back into its sheath on my belt. I slipped his flat cap down over his eyes and made it look like he was asleep. I left his rifle in plain sight to complete the illusion.

One down.

There had to be someone inside the house, guarding the family. Possibly two. I had to be extra careful now. I walked to the back door and eased it open until I could glance into the kitchen.

I heard a noise and froze. I recognised the noise. Dishes being washed. Mama!

I eased my head around the door to see she was alone in the kitchen. The door to the main room was open, but from here I couldn't see anyone in there. I stepped in behind Mama and put my hand quickly over her mouth. With my other hand, I pulled off my balaclava and smiled at her.

Her eyes were wide with fright and then seemed to erupt in tears. I've never seen emotion so immediate as that before. I let go of her mouth and she hugged me soundlessly. She quickly realised the situation and let me go.

I thought she looked a little frailer than I'd last seen her. She was never a big woman. Slight, made to look bigger by the long full skirts she wore and the big, baggy blouses. Always black colour.

I moved towards her ear and said quietly but distinctly, 'How many holligans in there?' I pointed to the main room. I knew she had a smattering of English and was a very bright and capable woman. Her eyes went wide again as she realised what I was attempting. She looked nervous but held up one finger.

I gave her a peck on the cheek then mimed for her to continue with the dishes. She managed a smile, nodded and showed me her crossed fingers.

I can shoot well with both hands but did not want gunshots to wake everyone up just yet. So I transferred the Glock into my left hand and held the throwing knife ready in my right. I'm extremely practised with the knife. But you never know if the target should move suddenly, or the knife hit a heavy gold necklace and glance off. It was always risky.

I dipped my head in and out of the doorway. Enough to get a glance at what was waiting for me.

I saw Olga's father László, sitting in his favourite chair, looking into space. Both the brothers were lounging on a sofa each. Looking bored but restricted to do anything about it. The huge boyfriend of Olga's, Géza, was sitting at the dining table, reading a book. I assumed Olga's absence meant she'd gone to the airport.

Standing by the front door, looking out the window towards the outbuildings was the tall lanky team member. He held his rifle loosely against his chest. The clothing he was wearing was so baggy on his thin frame, he looked more a caricature out of a comic.

He was at least fifteen metres away from me. More than ten strides in a hurry. Wooden floors that I remembered creaked. Could I make it in time? I doubted it. I needed to throw.

With a start, I felt a touch on my arm. I turned to see Mama. She put her lips to my ear and said, 'Shall I bring him in here?'

I shook my head. It was my first reaction, I didn't want her exposed to more danger. She just nodded and wiped her hands on her apron. She winked and pushed me gently to one side. I put my arm out to stop her and she looked at me with sadness in her eyes.

Her mouth formed the word, 'Please.'

On second reflection it made sense. I'd no time for further deliberation, she was on the move. I eased back out of sight and tried to think of the best way to silently disable the man.

I heard a conversation with Mama using her pidgin English. She sounded happy and encouraging. It went quiet. I heard the floors creaking. Would she be first through the door or the enemy?

It had to be quiet again. There was a man on the roof. At any moment someone else might come into the house. I heard Mama's muttering and realised it was for my benefit, she was coming in first. Smart woman. I knew where Olga got her brains from.

I flattened myself against the door jamb and slid out my knife. I held it in a safe, but light grip and knew exactly where I wanted to place it.

Mama swept in talking loudly in Hungarian to cover any noise I might make. I saw a movement behind her and made my move. The man was taller than me, but I got my hand around his mouth quickly due to the sheer surprise. The knife slid in under his chin and twisted to sever his spinal column. He didn't know he was dead.

I eased him to the ground and Mama immediately spat on him.

I heard a noise behind me and spun, knife ready, Glock pointed. It was Henrik with a big grin on his face. He hugged me so hard it hurt. He pushed away and held up one finger and pointed it to the roof. Man on the roof. I nodded. He pointed out through the kitchen and held up a finger. I shook my head and drew a finger across my throat. He smiled. I then held both hands out in the gesture of "And?"

He took my arm and led me to the main room. I saw the others in the room staring at me in puzzlement. I put a finger to my lips. Henrik stood

just back from the windows and pointed to the workshop. One finger. To the cattle barn, another finger. I held up three fingers, and he nodded. He looked at me and waved a finger at both of us and then pointed to the two men outside.

I shook my head and whispered. 'Not this time Henrik. Far too dangerous. These men are trained killers. Let me worry about them.'

I saw the disappointment on his face. But I had to move. Decision time. If I tried to take out the two in the barns, the roof man would see me and have an excellent position to fire. If I took him out, I then would have the good position to attack. I decided on the roof as the best place to be.

I was aware of another presence next to me. I looked up into the serious face of Géza. He looked at me then held one finger up to the roof and pointed it at his chest, then drew it across his throat slowly. I was shaking my head when Mama pulled at my arm. She said nothing but nodded.

Something was going on. Should I risk Géza taking out the professional? If he alerted the other two, it'd be a gun battle. I thought the risk too great. I was shaking my head when Géza walked out past me into the kitchen. I was about to stop him when Mama held back my arm. Again the head shake and mouthed, 'Please'.

What could I do? I nodded.

I followed Géza into the kitchen and watched him bend over the dead lanky guy. Géza pulled a knife from the dead man's belt and walked stealthily out of the back door. I picked up the rifle lying on the floor and hurried back to the front door.

I could see little from the inside but would be exposed if I stepped outside. I opened the front door and took a step back. I checked the action of the rifle and that it had a full clip. I knelt on the floor, with the rifle to my shoulder and waited.

Time passed slowly. It was silent everywhere. Tamas was still seated on the sofa, unbelieving that I had arrived out of nowhere. László watching me silently.

It seemed far too long before I heard a slithering noise above, followed by a big thump, coming from the back of the house. I waited, holding my breath. Still silence. A few minutes later I heard the floor creaking behind me and turned to see Géza walking towards me with a smile on his face. He slowly drew a finger across his throat. The other big guy was history.

Two left. How to draw them out?

Géza made the decision for me. He walked past me and on out of the open door and stood on the veranda. He was now partially blocking my sight. I quickly ran back through to the kitchen, out the back door and around the side to the front of the house. As I ran I saw the big man crumpled on the

ground. His neck broken from the fall, but his chest was covered in blood. It looked like Géza had cut his throat and made him bleed out slowly. What did Géza have against the big guy?

As I crept toward the front wall, the workshop building came into view. I crouched and sighted the rifle at the door. A step forward and I would be in sight of the cattle barn too.

I heard a bellow of indignation and pride come from somewhere. I think it was Géza venting his frustration. The top barn door flew open and over the top half, there was the weedy-looking man holding a rifle.

I fired twice, quickly. The sounds echoing across the woods and bouncing back. Before the echo had died, I'd moved out to the front of the house and was running towards the cow barn. I saw a movement there as the black guy revealed himself to see what the noise was about. He had only a few seconds from the shots to react. His rifle quickly to his shoulder and pointed at me.

I fired three shots on the run. Hoping they'd at least make him duck down. I saw him fly backwards as two struck him in the chest. The rifle flew away and landed in a cloud of dust.

The shots died away and there was silence. I spun around and checked there were no more surprises.

Rifle ready, I went and checked the two men were dead. They were. I pulled them under cover and ran back to the house. I pulled the dead man from the kitchen and put him next to the other two outside. They would have to wait until later.

If I had the head count right, two were with Olga at the airport. Mama confirmed this for me later. In a few hours, they'd be calling in to check if all was well. I needed to stall them.

I walked into the house and everyone wanted to hug me. Mama was full of kisses and big Géza wanted to crush my hand several times.

Henrik was overjoyed. 'Every time we meet, someone dies.' This seemed to please him.

I let them have their moment of relief before saying, 'We still have two more to go and they have Olga. Tell me everything you know about these men. I mean everything.'

The radio message came through a few hours later. It was Henrik who provided the deception idea. He said he was very good at mimicry. Henrik could imitate the man they called, Muddy. He even knew his call sign, Baker 5.

‘They were always patrolling around the house at night. Their radio calls to each other used to wake me up. So I was listening to all their talking. I want to learn more English, so I like to what is the word utánoz...mimick. I can sound like him.’

He then went on to say a few words he’d heard the man say. The family were nodding. Tamas even laughed.

He took the messages and replied as I whispered in his ear what to say. When they signed off his face was flushed with success.

‘Just like the London days, James. No?’

I smiled at his reference to my name as they knew me then.

‘Now what we do?’ Henrik’s face was shining with excitement.

‘We wait.’ I said, bringing them all down to earth.

We had a good idea of how long it would take from the airport, so when we heard the tyres on the dirt road – we were ready.

When the two men and Olga walked through the door, the whole Kobay family was waiting for them. At first, nothing seemed to have changed. But it dawned on the Asian fella first that there was no guard there.

He turned to look at his colleague who now realised something was amiss. The family were smiling at him. Then they pulled out the Glock 17s taken from the holligans and pointed them at the two remaining intruders.

Their leader was a professional, his reactions fast. He grabbed Olga in front of him and pulled out his knife to hold it at her throat. But I was already behind him.

I’d waited at the side of the house and moved as soon as he walked through the door. I’d asked the family to give me a few seconds before pulling the guns. So I was in a position to take the last man down from behind.

With one hand I grabbed the arm with the knife. The other hand hit him solidly on the back of his head with a Glock. He dropped soundlessly to the ground. The Asian had the sense to raise his arms.

His war was over.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JONNY TAMM

I could see the change in Nicker.

From the moment he was denied any alcohol he started to fret. But give the guy credit, he soon recovered, and we began to see the old Nicker back. Within a few days, he was sober and in command of himself and the team again.

I never caught him at it, but I'm sure he'd something on him. I know he likes the weed, but he also likes coke too. If he was still using, it didn't affect his performance too much. Not enough to take action against him, anyway. He was every bit as aware as I was that boredom would be our main problem. Our target was three days out and we'd nothing to do but babysit fucking shitkickers.

Overall, Nicker didn't do badly. The hunting trip was a success, for us all. We like to shoot the crap out of shit. We all like to kill stuff. It worked well. The two yokel lads were not impressed when we let fly with the SA80s. I nearly decapitated one deer. Blood everywhere, a mess to carry home. I made them carry it. Think only they can shoot.....?

But it was boring. Came the day, we were a little more enthusiastic. I think the real problem was that we were waiting for just one man. He was only a man, who didn't even know we were here. Where's the challenge in that? When we used to wait in ambush for a bunch of ragheads that was different. You never knew which way that was to go. Some of them bastards were bloody good with their weapons. Others ran like shit.

Now here I disagree with Nicker tactically. I think we should let the target come to us. We control the environment and he walks right into the trap. No...the stupid fucker wants to meet the guy at a crowded airport. Risk the chance of a big scene, guns and everything. Yes....I know the man wouldn't be armed. He's just come in on a commercial flight, not like us. But he was supposed to be dangerous. As the Colonel said to me, 'Fucking dangerous.'

But it was still a big risk. Would he run into the Kobay woman's arms and we walk up to him and ask him politely if he would join us? So we could take him all the way back to England to meet the father of the children he had killed? No. That's not going to work at any level.

So I was a little relieved when he didn't show. Now we could revert back to my plan and wait for him at the farm. But still, Nicker wanted to meet the next plane in and so on. I began to get a feeling about this Magician fucker. I wanted to check in with the team and make sure everything was all right. See if they were still on their toes. Once satisfied

with that, I was in a hurry to get back to our ground base security. I feel much happier there.

I know Nicker never even noticed the Kobay woman at all on the trip, but I did. She knew what this was all about. Alright, we hadn't said a thing to anyone why we were here. Apart from picking up the rotting corpse of the Justin guy. The very fact we wanted to entice The Magician into our web, must have told her we didn't want to give him a medal for bravery.

You only had to look at her face on the way out, it was one of resignation. She was not in control of her own destiny, nor of her friend coming in. While we were waiting, her agitation showed. Her eyes were everywhere, almost like she expected him to emerge magically from the crowds. When we said we were returning home, she was somehow more....relaxed. Did she imagine her ordeal was over?

She was silent the whole trip, so I could never tell by the tone of her voice what she was thinking. So it was with some sense of relief that we got back to the farm and could plan the next step.

As I got out of the car I was surprised to see only Mighty, up on the roof. I'd expected to see the others in the two barns covering us with their weapons. Even though I'd said we were coming back empty, I expected them to show themselves, so we knew where they were.

I shook off that feeling. These boys were fucking lazy. Leave them alone and they wander about aimlessly. No officer material in any of them. I know Nicker had asked the family to snitch on any who broke position while we were away. But would they? I doubted it.

The whole family was in the main room when we got back. Where they should be. I didn't see Thorny who was inside guard duty. But he could've just gone for a piss. I also notice the big bearded guy was missing too. Something made the hackles on my neck stand up. I started reaching for my handgun when suddenly I saw the whole family had a gun each and was pointing at me and Nicker. They were all smiling silently. I froze. These may be yokels, but they could still shoot and kill.

I turned to look at Nicker for his reaction and tried to warn him but was too late. A shadow appeared behind him and he fell to ground. I was looking at one of our own Glock 17s and into the eyes of a stranger.

From behind him walked a giant. He wore Infra-red goggles and Mighty's clothing. He took off the goggles and revealed the huge man that was the Kobay woman's boyfriend. He'd taken Mighty's place on the roof and was a distraction that fooled us both. All the irksome thoughts of the last few days congealed together.

I knew this stranger had to be The Magician.

I was treated a lot better than I would've treated him. Nicker and I were first of all handcuffed and then locked in a separate bedroom each.

This allowed us both time to realise the enormity of the situation we were in. Five of our team were dead. Just like that. One moment here, the next....gone forever. We've never experienced that before. All our battles with professional soldiers and terrorist outfits, we never came near to this sort of sudden ending of our lives. I was very close to tears.

That was the rest of that day. I think Nicker was let loose long enough to use the radio to recall our pilot Dawson and arrange a rendezvous.

The man called The Magician came into my room to tell me what was going to happen. It was the first time I had seen him close up. He wore a camouflage suit and a balaclava. I could only see his eyes. They were piercing and almost hypnotic. His voice sounded Scots. So he was a bastard, Jock.

'Your transport's at 9:15 tomorrow, from the same place as you landed. We have a minor problem. You've six bodies to get to the plane. There's some rough country to travel.'

He stood and looked at me.

'Okay.' was all I could say.

'I've spoken to the man called Nicker.' I wondered what that meant. Was he still alive? 'So I'm asking you as confirmation. Who sent you to get me?'

There was no way I'm giving away that Intel. And I was pretty sure Nicker wouldn't either.

'I don't know. I'm just one of the hired hands.'

'So you are. Well, let's see.....'

He took out a knife that looked a lot like Muddy's. I braced myself for a painful interrogation.

'You came for Justin Ryce-Hardin's body.' He slapped the knife into the palm of his hand. 'That obviously means the Ryce-Hardin family are involved. Now....if I were Mr Ryce-Hardin I'd want to get some sort of revenge on the man who killed his son. Am I making sense here?' I just stared at him. He was going to get nothing from me. More knife and palm slapping.

'So the logical train of thought is.... Ryce-Hardin sent you. He's a rich man, I know, I checked him out a while ago. Ex-military. Colonel isn't he.....?'

Nothing from me.

'Here's the problem.....he didn't know where his son was. Only one other man alive in England did. Am I getting warm?'

‘Go fuck yourself!’

‘Tried that. Didn’t work. The name Jamison Willoughby mean anything to you?’

I remained resolute and impassive.

‘I can tell from your eyes contracting that I’m right. So....Ryce-Hardin and Willoughby, the terrible twos. I thought all this was over. I promise those good....innocent....people in there...’ he pointed with the knife. ‘... that the death of Justin finished this debacle of greed and incompetence. But now...you’re here. So....what to do with you?’

The knife slapped into his hand. The only sound in the room.

I felt deflated. He knew the answers. I wasn’t going to confirm anything. But there was little point from now on for posturing. Wait! What did he say..... ? ‘Your transport is at 9:15 tomorrow’. So he was letting me go....?

‘A few months ago...if this had happened....you’d be dead. Your colleagues buried alongside you. But I’ve retired. At least, I’m trying to. So I feel merciful. You’re not the problem.’ He pointed the knife at me. His soft Scottish accent almost lulling me into liking him.

‘So instead of retribution, the chosen emotional outlet of Ryce-Hardin and friends, I chose to be merciful and send a message. You and your...leader.....can be the bearers.’

The following day we loaded six bodies onto a flat trailer outside the farmhouse. Nicker and I did all the work. The Kobay family looked on, holding our weapons. I felt one wrong move and their discipline would crack. I didn’t know why they’d not attacked us. I would. They stood resolute and emotionless watching us sweat in the warm morning sun.

I managed to talk to Nicker, but the people with the guns were always listening so it had to be non-threatening in nature.

We discussed our fallen comrades and I could see the anger rise in Nicker. We both felt bad, angry and wanted to do something to avenge them. But right now was not the time. If we lived...then we would do something that helped wiped the slate clean. It wouldn’t bring them back, but we would be able to live with ourselves a little bit better.

The man called The Magician, wore the same clothing and balaclava as the day before and was saying an emotional goodbye to the whole family. I noticed the girl Olga hugged and kissed him. Her six plus boyfriend did not seem at all upset by that. He even fiercely hugged the Magician until he was pushed away. The mother was in tears and so were the two brothers. Country folk. No accounting for them. Fucking wusses.

When the love fest had finished we were loaded on the trailer and secured with nylon cuffs. The big boyfriend got on the tractor seat and started the engine. The Magician sat on the side of the trailer with a Glock 17 in his hands. Far enough away from us to be safe from attack. The bodies lay between us and piled two high.

The journey was rough. I'd pointed out on a map the evac point. We'd taken a more direct route on foot, but by road it was bumpy. We cut across two fields and eventually came to the area I recognised. All the way The Magician just sat and looked around at the countryside. His gun hand resting on one knee, or the other. Never fully relaxed. It took us nearly an hour.

The tractor stopped, and big boyfriend turned in his seat to look at Magician. Something passed between them and suddenly I became nervous. What if this was to be the resting place for *all* the Baker Boys?

'Unload.' The Magician said as he slid off the trailer. The gun was up and pointing now.

Once again we did all the hard work. Taking an end each of the body bags that were made from plastic sheeting and laying them in a neat respectful row. Nicker cursed the whole time. But I held my tongue. This was not over yet. When we'd finished we sat on the grass to get our breath back. Once again the gay groupies were hugging again, and big bugger got on the tractor and drove off, without a backward glance.

The Magician stood and waited. Looking at his watch every now and again. We all remained silent. I wanted to ask Nicker what had happened to him? Did he give away who had sent us? I still thought not. He made no effort to communicate. We just looked at each other a few times and let it go at that. It was a waiting game.

If we could just get that gun off The Magician....

The Magician heard the plane first. I saw his head turn to the south, the gun slowly rose up and pointed at us. He took two steps back and then looked back at us.

'Do you have a go, no go signal?'

We both shook our heads. We would say that, wouldn't we?

'Because if he doesn't land, I've no need to keep either of you alive. Another two bodies would only add to the soil quality.'

Nicker finally found his voice. 'Listen, you bastard. There's no way we want that plane to go around. Just let us go home. You've done enough damage.'

‘I want you to tell your “employer” a simple message. *Leave me alone.* If he doesn’t, then I haven’t *started* to damage him. I’d better not see either of you again.’

The drone now getting louder, and Nicker looked at me. Was he thinking of rushing the man? I hoped not. The distance was too great and there were the obstacles of the bodies in the way. Both our hands were tied. Even if one of us could make it.....

I saw Nicker’s shoulders slump as he discarded the thought of escape. We’d been caught, tricked and fucking conned. I blamed Nicker for all this. Had we done everything my way this situation would be completely reversed.

We could see the white of the plane making a direct approach now. I wondered what the pilot would think when he saw only three men standing and all those body bags. Would he turn around and fly off? The Magician waved as he made his approach. A wave to show everything was all right.

I was relieved to see the wheels drop and the plane descend rapidly. The landing was bumpy and loud. I feared for the undercarriage as the pilot came in so hot. He made the turn and trundled as near to us as he could get.

The Magician held the gun touching my chest as he cut my bonds. He waved the gun towards the plane and I knew what he wanted from me. I moved forwards and released the door handle. I pulled, and the steps folded down towards me.

I was aware of Nicker standing by the bodies and suddenly aware that The Magician was standing right next to me. He’d one Glock pointing at me and another towards the door, waiting for the pilot. With the Glock still in his hand, he put it to his lips and made the Shoosh sign.

The pilot poked his head out the door and glared at me, questions boiling up inside him. I knew Dawson was not a tolerant man.

‘What the f.....’ was as far as he got before he saw the gun on him.

‘We ran into fucking problems.’ I said as casually as I could. The last thing we needed was our pilot shot. Though I suspected The Magician could fly a fucking plane as well.

It took a good half an hour to load the plane with the body bags, even after the plastic cuffs were off. They’d dug into our wrists and they were bleeding badly. All the time Dawson fretted how long he was off the radar screen and his diverted flight plan. He couldn’t say he was “lost” again.

The Magician stood well back inside the plane, watching everything closely. Two of us at a time hauled each bag up the steps and placed it in the cargo hold. There were several large boxes of cargo already there. Strapped heavily to the ceiling and walls of the fuselage. We didn’t secure the body bags. Any turbulence would cause the straps to cut them up. We had to hope it was a smooth ride.

When we were finished, The Magician made Nicker and I drink a little water. Then he made the pilot stand well away from the aircraft. I'd a moment's panic when I thought he was going to fly the plane on his own. Then he boarded the two of us to sit with the corpses on the makeshift seats we'd arrived on. Once again we had the plastic cuffs on us. On the already damaged wrists, it was painful.

Then he allowed the pilot on board and settled into his seat. There was a brief conversation which I couldn't hear, and The Magician shut the pilot's door and sat with his back against it. An old pillow he used as a seat and he sat there watching us, two guns ready for use.

The plane revved up and the bumpy journey began. Dawson didn't hang around. He quickly rotated, and the craft ploughed through the air to operational height, I guessed at about 40,000 feet.

It was around 1600 miles to London and then a while onto the landing field we'd taken off from. It was to be a long and uncomfortable journey for Nicker and me. No toilet breaks, no food and water. That's why he made us drink only a little before take-off.

I think both Nicker and I dozed a little. Each time I woke I noticed The Magician was wide awake and still watching us. For the whole journey, he hadn't moved.

It was nearly four hours later I felt the plane begin its descent. The Magician got to his feet and went into the cockpit. I'm sure to check where we were landing.

'What do we do?' I said quietly to Nicker.

'What *can* we fucking do?' he said equally quietly.

'He's not going to kill us. Is he?' I said more hopefully than convincingly.

'Let's just wait and see. If the opportunity comes....' said Nicker. I could sense the fear in his voice. I'm not sure because of our current situation, or the situation we'd find ourselves having to explain all this to the Colonel. At least the Colonel looked like he was getting his son back. Part problem solved. That's how I was planning to explain it.

The plane made a smooth landing and taxied to a stop. The Magician and the pilot came out of the cockpit and Dawson opened the door and lowered the steps.

The airfield was one of the Colonel's friend's local flying club. It looked deserted.

'Anyone call ahead for transport?' asked Nicker.

Dawson shook his head. 'He wouldn't let me.'

'You can call now.' The Magician said as he walked down the steps and around the nose of the aircraft, checking the perimeter.

Both Nicker and I struggled to our feet and made our way out of the aircraft with difficulty.

'For fuck's sake, cut us loose, Dawson.' I said quietly. My wrists were a mass of screaming pain, wet and dried blood.

Dawson looked around briefly, The Magician out of sight for a moment and he pulled out a clasp knife. He severed both sets of plastic cuffs and we rubbed our sore wrists gently to get the circulation going. When it kicked in, it'd hurt even more for a while.

I stretched and looked around at the quiet airport. This is the way to travel. From one country to another with no passports, or Customs.

I ducked down to see under the fuselage to see where The Magician had gone to. I couldn't see his feet. I walked to the nose and looked at the other side of the aircraft. A hundred metres away were a few hangers and a few light aircraft parked up. But otherwise, the airfield looked empty.

The Magician had disappeared.

PART THREE – Manhunt

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHARLES RYCE-HARDIN

Justin is buried under his favourite Elm tree.

At least his mother thinks that was his favourite tree. Samantha agrees. But then I think those two agree with each other just to get the better of me. I know I have a forceful personality and sometimes....with family...there's a need to back off a little. But I don't know how to back off. I've made a career by not backing off.

Standing over the grave for a long time after the rest had left, made me realise just what effect their departure had on me. I went through a wide range of emotions. Anger, fear, despondency and back to anger again. Anger was a motivating force. Anger was going to get my revenge. His returned body was not the closure I'd hoped it would be.

The two headstones lay side by side. Both identical, both with the same family goodbye on them. Only the names were different. In one series of actions, I'd lost my two eldest children. Both died unnecessarily. And both at the hands of the same chap. A villain with no name and no face. No identity and no way of finding him. But, there had to be a way. I was not going to know any peace until I'd found a way.

I felt a presence at my side and turned to see Willoughby standing there. He was wearing the same suit he'd arrived in weeks before. He looked at the two graves with a suitably solemn look on his face. I know this man's a manipulator, but he helped get Justin back to me. I had to owe him for that. Being civil was the best I could do for the moment. I'd provided him with a temporary home until Justin's return. Now what? What would he expect now? Could I turn him back onto the streets? No. Of course not. Should he live here forever? No, of course not.

I know Sara is suspicious of his motives and doesn't "warm" to the fellow. Women's words for 'can't stand the chap.'

Willoughby said, 'Having him back doesn't make it all better, does it? Doesn't make it all right.'

'No.'

'If it's going to help....we can try again to get the man who did it.'

'We tried that. And failed. Spectacularly. Five more deaths on my conscience.'

'That's because we used your men and just force. This Magician fellow is good at deflecting force.'

‘So there’s another way?’

‘I think so. We need to put him in a position he cannot defend. He can’t defend himself against the whole world. Somebody out there knows who he is and where he is. We just have to find *them*.’

‘Just have to find *them*. As easy as that?’

‘We need to find a way to contact him. We need to find somebody who knows how.’

‘We just tried that too.’

‘Ah, yes. Friends and family approach. I’m thinking more....professional. I know of someone who has hired him. Has met him. Okay...in disguise, but enough to get a description.’

I found my heart beating faster. Was this a new hope for me? ‘Will he going to do that for us?’

‘We can try one of two ways. We can offer a financial incentive, or we can make him an offer he can’t refuse.’

‘Who will make the approach? You?’

Willoughby shook his head. ‘Neither of us must. No...I have no influence anymore. Any assets I had, have gone with the demise of The Brethren.’

‘Nicker and Tamm, then?’

Willoughby shrugged. ‘If that’s all we can muster between us.’

‘I’m not so sure about Nicker these days.’

‘Get them both here for a few days. Put them through a toughening up course, or something. Keep them sober and sharp.’

‘Okay. What’s this man’s name?’

‘Orlando Stone. An agent. Like the one that sent Justin to Hungary.’

‘An agent. Someone who arranges assignments?’

‘Yes. You’re surprised there’re agents that do this? Somebody has to.’

‘What good will a description do? No one can recognise anyone from words!’

‘I’m thinking more of a sketch. It’s a start. Peel away the disguise. Make the face thinner, younger. More hair perhaps. We could make a fair guess at getting close.’

‘Who’ll do the sketch?’

‘You must have some influence with the police? A man of your substance. Call in a favour. We need a police artist for a few hours. Make a donation to the police fund. Can do?’

‘I suppose so. Then what?’

‘When I had The Brethren, I had power and influence. My associates provided all the resources. Now I have nothing. This one man left your daughter on my doorstep and took everything away from me. You lost a son and daughter. I can’t begin to imagine how hard that must be. But you have a family still and your estate intact. You have a future to look forward to. But for me...my wife has left me. Filed for a divorce, custody of the children as well. She’ll want over half my estate. I’ve lost eleven associates. All killed by *him*.’

I watched as a tear seem to form in his eye. Was this fellow trying to con me, or was he emotional just for himself? That angered me. All emotion should be for the two dead children, right in front of us.

He continued after he got control of his voice. ‘So, I have money but can’t get at it. I’ve lost my family. I’ve no prospects. And I’m under investigation, where the culprits are all dead and have left me to carry the can, as it were. No passport, or permission to travel. I may be called in for questioning at any time and have to report to a parole officer once a week. All this even though I’ve committed no crime. But those are the conditions of my release. There’s not enough evidence to charge me or hold me in custody. So I had to be temporarily freed.’

He was beginning to ramble; all this pent-up frustration was taking its toll on the fellow. An obviously intelligent and educated man, reduced to a snivelling wreck by the process of the law. At least, that’s the way he saw it all.

He hadn’t finished yet, ‘I have a very vested interest in bringing this Magician to justice, Mr Ryce-Hardin. As do you.’

‘And this...sketch is going to help...how?’

‘I’d like to fight my case. I’d like to take it to court. Leave it to the police and it’ll be years before they’ve enough evidence to go to court. If I take the initiative, I can hope to clear my name sooner. When that happens, and it will, I can get my hands on my money. What’s left after the wife has her share.’

‘The sketch?’

‘The sketch. If I take the police to court, it will become a high-profile case. High-profile lawyers if you know what I mean. If I can get in front of the TV cameras and held up a sketch which shows a man that murdered your daughter and framed me. The whole world will see it.’

‘Perhaps not the whole....’

‘Somebody will know who he is. Where he is.’

‘Is there no other way.....?’

‘I can’t think of any. This agent, Stone, perhaps he can tell us how he contacts The Magician. Perhaps that might be a second string we can consider?’

‘And I suppose it’s me that will have to pay for all this?’

‘I have no money. I can’t do this on my own.’

‘So it looks like you’ll be staying a little while longer, Mr Willoughby?’

‘I would be very grateful.’

‘If your court case is successful. What happens then?’

‘I’ll get my estate back. Pay off the wife. Pay you back every penny you’ve invested in me, perhaps with some interest. And you’ll always have my undying gratitude. I’ll always be available to help, should you call.’

‘Seems a pity your wife should get so much from all your hard work?’

‘I wish I might have her removed as easily as the police think I’ve had others removed. Unless of course, you and your men could....’ For a brief moment I considered what he said. ‘I was joking, of course. I’d be suspect number one.’ Willoughby laughed. Realised where he was, and his face became serious again.

I thought I’d stood in front of my deceased children long enough. This inactivity was not doing anyone any good. It was time something was done about their deaths.

‘So you think this is the way to go?’ I asked Willoughby, looking him dead in the eye.

‘I can’t think of anything else. If we can get any information out of Stone, it’ll be a plus. As it stands....we’ve nothing to go on. The Magician is a ghost.’

I saw how this fellow’s mind was working. He was seeing his freedom being a step nearer, with me paying the bills. It was an added bonus if we could catch the man we both wanted to get our hands on.

I don’t like to feel I’m being manipulated, and this chap could certainly manipulate. He was head of an organisation where he probably did nothing *but* that. But his ideas were in line with what I wanted. For now. It would be a win-win situation if we got this Magician fellow in our grasp. There were some answers I wanted from him. So did Willoughby.

If I was to foot the bill for this project, I needed to set some ground rules.

I turned away from the graves and started to walk back towards the house. It was a pleasant day, not too hot and no chance of rain. Willoughby moved into step with me.

‘I’ve had you checked out, Willoughby.’ I said casually.

‘I expected no less.’

‘Indeed. As you say....I’ve influence in the police force. And a contact confirmed what you said about them releasing you until they could put together a charge that would stand up in court. As you said, they’re a long way from that yet.’

I looked at him for a reaction. He shrugged. ‘That’s the damn nuisance part. I’m in limbo until it’s decided one way or another. If I could produce this Magician and get him to confess.....it’s a whole other story.’

I nodded and walked on. ‘But I’m not made of money, Willoughby. If this court case of yours drags on, it would become tiresomely expensive. We need to put a cap on it, you know.’

‘I agree, sir.’

‘What would you estimate the costs?’ I knew he’d aim high and settle for less. Reverse psychology.

‘The cost is immaterial, sir. I will repay all of it. I have the resources when it’s all over.’

‘And if you don’t win the case?’

I stopped and looked into his eyes. This was the crux of the matter. Was this man innocent? If he was, would justice prove him so? If he was guilty, would he get away with it? Would I have to bear the costs, or would he?

‘The important thing here is that you get retribution for your children. You get to sleep at night knowing, as a father, you did all you could to let them rest in peace. The only way you’re going to stand a chance of that is if I go to court. Whether I win, or not. We just need to get that sketch out there. After that....’

From what he said, I could see a point where I might stop paying out for his legal fees. It was a definitive cut-off point. I felt we should both agree to that and proceed.

‘Okay.’ I said, ‘Let’s agree that the principal point is to get a sketch of this Magician fellow, then broadcast it nationwide. Worldwide if possible. At that point....and not before, we take a view on the future of your case and its possible costs. If all’s going well, perhaps...I’ll continue to fund your case. Which if successful...’

‘When successful!’

‘When successful, you reimburse all costs back to me. Does that sound fair?’

‘Agreed. I’m much indebted to you, sir.’

‘We were initially enemies, now we’re a partnership. We’ll work together to bring to justice the man who killed my children and your associates.’

‘Then we have an agreement?’ He said holding out his hand.

I slowly took it and smiled. ‘We do.’

He released my hand and said seriously, ‘Then call Nick and Tamm and get them started. We have work to do.’

We’d reached the house and Herbert was waiting to open the door for us. I went in first and Willoughby followed.

I was sure I heard Herbert say to Willoughby, ‘Thanks for bringing him home, sir.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ORLANDO STONE

To look at me you'd never guess what I do for a living.

Six-foot-two. Armani suits. Silk shirts and ties. Kurt Geiger shoes. Silk socks too when you can see them. Of course, that's only for meetings. At home, I wear the normal things. In winter a onesie. Summer, shorts and vest. All designer labels, of course.

So I look impressive when at work. Added to that – I'm black. And I make style, look good.

If you think my wardrobe is impressive, you should see Carole's! Then take a look at Susie's, our daughter. At ten she's a fashion model. At least she thinks she is.

Sometimes I think I just work to keep us in up-to-date clothing. At other times I KNOW I do.

Why do we all need so much clothing? It shows success, that's why. When you come from the humble backgrounds that we do, knowin' an' showin' you've made it - is important.

I drive an IS 250 Lexus, my wife a convertible BMW 4 series and my daughter drives us crazy.

We live in a big house. We chose it because of its size. Detached, of course, with six bedrooms, three baths and a large garden. Triple garage and a curved drive in and out. My office - oak panelled with books and all sorts of highbrow stuff. Huge desk and overstuffed chairs. I love it.

Our social life is one non-stop party. Somethin' every day. Especially little Susie. At the old age of ten, she has to have a diary to keep track of her social engagements. My wife tries to keep track using the calendar on her latest generation smartphone. The Twitter page is never off the computer and phone screens for either of them.

Okay, sounds like we're flashy and show-offs, but after a family history of poverty, we need to feel the benefits of a prosperous life. Once we're more used to having enough money, we can be more....unassuming. But until then, we love enjoying the good life.

My singular hobby is model-making. Specifically, wooden sailing ships. Around the turn of the 1800s, Nelson's time. I'm currently working on a 38-inch model of the HMS Surprise. I love it because it's the ship featured in the movie "Master and Commander", with Russell Crowe as Jack Aubrey. The few moments I have to myself, I try to pursue this hobby. At all other times I...bury myself in work.

When I say “bury”, it’s not difficult, time-consuming, or even really “work”.

Someone calls me with a problem they want resolving. I make a difficult decision between which of my only two assets will do the job. I contact the asset and agree on a fee. I contact the client and agree on a fee, to include my thirty percent. I make it sound simple. In its basic form, it is. But there are many considerations and variables to take into account.

The people I deal with are....well....not honest citizens. If you know what I mean. What they’re attempting is illegal. What they’re asking me to do is illegal. What I do is illegal. This, in the eyes of the law, makes me a criminal. Also, it’s considered immoral by many. But I help clean the streets of filth. That’s how I look at it.

When you deal with hardened criminals, it’s difficult not to feel you’re a criminal yourself. Can you trust someone who wants to kill an enemy? In my game – you have to! It’s collaboration. You get money to do a job they can’t or won’t do. Do it in such a fashion as they’re never associated with it. That gives you an edge over them. The money they pay is compensation.

You have to consider why they want this work done. You need to get to the bottom of it quickly too. For instance. Some of my clients have taken insurance out on their victims. So they can expect a hefty insurance pay-out. But only if the victim looks like they’ve had an *accident*. We call this an “insurance job”.

Until the job is finished, I have to take responsibility for everything. I have to pay-out the asset, normally fifty percent up front, plus expenses. If it all goes wrong, that’s all dead money to me. Consequently, I require at least fifty percent payment up front from my clients.

There’s a price below which I will not go for an assignment. My minimum to date is £300,000. When you consider the time, effort and risk there is in this business, the return of thirty percent of that is not really that much. Also, there’s always the risk of getting caught as an accessory to murder and sent to prison. That can be too long a stretch for a family man.

It can take up to ten years to get established in this business. There has to be a trust between two parties. You can’t just advertise, ‘I supply assassins to the discerning criminal’. You have to do one assignment, then another, get the word around quietly. It takes time and patience. I was lucky. Most of my initial work came from an established source.

There can be months between jobs, too. I have a family to support and a tailor. Most assets only want to do a few jobs a year. There’s a limited number of assets available. So getting work and accomplishing an end result can be tricky and sometimes not at all doable.

It sometimes comes down to information. If you have the correct and accurate info on the target, then the asset has a better chance of making the

hit and getting clean away. He's more likely to accept the contract and move on with it. Sometimes this information comes from the client, sometimes the asset does the research. But every time I do some of that work too. I need to be sure what's going on and to whom.

One vital point to remember. Make sure you're hitting the right victim. It hasn't happened to me, but I know a few agents who've been responsible for killing the wrong person. The shitstorm that follows is amazing.

Carole and I came from Chicago nearly ten years ago. We came to England with the Mareno family. They provided me with a certificate of work and I remained on their books for a year, before setting myself up in my own business. I called myself an Asset Manager. Still do. I never go into details, but people like to think that it's something to do with financial investments. Let them think what they like.

I tried to get British nationality for me and Carole, but there were some historical records about my father's association with the Chicago Mafia that scuppered that. However, my daughter was born here and has dual nationality. Something I'm quite proud of.

I admit, my father did have dealings with the Mafia, I did inherit his business. He was an agent for them too. I learned everything I know from him. Especially attention to detail and loyalty. In this business, no one trusts you if you've been disloyal at any time.

He never made it to England. There was one big bust-up between the families in Chicago and dad was caught in between. He was gunned down in the street. Mother died a few months later from grief. Two months later the Mareno family said they were leaving the USA and did I want to go with them.

Carole and I discussed it at length. The other families were still at war and we were in danger. We decided to leave and try to return when everything had settled down. That never happened. We changed our name before we left the States and had forged documents for both of us. We've kept the name, Stone. Chosen from the group, Sly and the Family Stone.

Carole was a cousin to the head of the Mareno family. So I married into the business as it were. But Papa Mareno was a careful and caring man. As soon as we hit these shores, he told me to take Carole and distance myself from their family affairs. The writing had been on the wall for the Mafia for many years at this time. Their stronghold on whole cities was lessening. The law enforcement agencies were finding more and more creative ways to put the criminals behind bars and keep them there. At this time, London was not a stronghold for the Mafia. I believe it's more so now, than it was then.

However, we must be careful here what we mean by the word "Mafia". Today, the original Mafia has all but gone. The days of Sicilian ideas of

revenge and money earning concepts are outdated. There's a new breed in town that's more sophisticated and law savvy. An army of lawyers can tie the courts up for years on the simplest of prosecution cases.

There are now high-tech ways of extracting money from people's accounts. No longer the need to rob banks, or armoured cars. Cybercrime is the way forward. Drugs, of course, will always be the standby earner for many an organised crime syndicate. The key is always giving the people what they want. In the 1930s, in prohibition America, what did the people want? Booze. Gambling, prostitution. And of course the perennial – drugs.

Now I work as hard as I can to build up an estate that will maintain a lifestyle for my daughter for many years to come. I've invested mostly in real estate, with some offshore investments to diversify my portfolio. Susie goes to a private school as I want her to have the best education. A dumb and ignorant rich girl is no good to the world, or to herself. I have this great house in Richmond, just enough out of the city to have a feel of suburban life. Near enough to keep in touch with the pulse of the societies we now move in.

I present myself as an upwardly mobile, rich and successful businessman. My clients see that in me and appreciate I get things done. I charge a premium for my services, especially as I'm now one of the few agents left in the London area.

A peculiar thing about me, one of several - I don't like guns. A strange business to be in for someone that doesn't like the loud noise they make. I deal every day with people who use them but have never picked one up or pulled a trigger in my life. I think I'm incapable of even holding one. I hope I never have one pointed at me either. I have no idea how I'd cope with that.

Carole had just left, taking Susie to school. I like her to do the school run. It gives me the thirty minutes thinking time before the day starts to get...complicated. I needed to get on with my day and started to write down my list of things to do. I sat at my desk in my tracksuit bottoms and a sweatshirt. I felt comfortable. I felt...in charge of my life.

The doorbell signalled an end to everything that was ordered and structured. I heaved myself out of the chair and walked towards the front door. We have a glass panel in the door for privacy, but it's not clear glass. No one knows where I live that I wouldn't invite into my home. So the shadowy figure outside did not pose a threat. I opened the door.

The man outside was a stranger. He was wiry and not too tall. He looked a bit of a scruff, with worn jeans and a torn check shirt. His trainers were old and scruffy. We don't get beggars in this district, so I was about to turn him away when he spoke.

It was a slight London accent, but was slow and clear in its delivery. 'Orlando Stone?'

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. They looked menacing.

'Who wants to know?'

'I've a little business I need to discuss with you, if I may.'

The guy stared at me waiting for something. His eyes didn't blink.

'Sorry. I do things by appointment only. Please call in and we can arrange a time and a place. This is not the time OR place. Thank you.' I started to close the door.

'A mutual friend sent me.'

'Who?'

'May I come in? I don't want to talk business on the doorstep.'

'Neither do I. Call and make an appointment.'

'I'm here about, The Magician.'

'Never heard of him. Goodbye.'

Then my worst nightmare started. He pulled up his shirt to reveal a gun stuck in his belt.

'I'm here about The Magician. Now...can I come in?'

His eyes were like steel and the smile had left his face altogether.

He stepped forward, and I stepped back. He must have seen the fear on my face, because he gained confidence and the smile was back.

'Just a little chat, Mr Stone. That's all.'

'What do you want?' was all I could stammer.

'Information. Anything you know about the man called, The Magician.'

'I don't know anyone by that name.' I was almost backed against a wall by now. The stranger had followed me, even closing the front door behind him.

My fear was reducing. His gun was covered by his shirt and he was standing looking around the room.

'What do you want?' was all I could think to say.

'I want to meet The Magician. I need to meet him. I think you can tell me how I can do that.'

'I told you, I don't....'

'Yada, yada. Yes you do!' This was more forceful, and he closed in on me. The eyes were steel again. 'You've employed him as an asset. Five times in the last four years. You must know how to contact him. Just tell me and I can contact him too.'

This man knew more than I first thought. 'I can't give away that sort of confidential information.' I said as forcefully as I could.

He was looking at the photographs on my desk. 'Your wife and daughter? Yes?' I nodded. 'Carole and Susie?' I nodded again. Where did he get this knowledge from?

'I'm sure you're fond of them. Mean a lot to you, do they?' Where was this heading? 'How do you contact The Magician?' I could feel an increase of a threat in the air.

Perhaps I could give just a little information and deny the rest. 'I put an advert in a magazine. He sometimes answers it. But he won't anymore.'

'Why?'

'Because he's retired. Why should he look at the magazine anymore? He won't answer any add put in it for him.'

'What magazine?'

I had to be careful here. 'The Magic Magazine.'

He was standing over my almost complete model of HMS Surprise. His hands almost touched the delicate rigging. My mouth opened to speak. But nothing came out.

'What do you say...in your ads?'

I wanted him away from the model. I was sure anything I told him would go no further. The Magician would not ever look at the mag again. I was feeling really threatened now. The man was severely menacing as he stood to face me. I was taller than him and a good hundred pounds of muscle heavier than him. But he exuded aggression and determination.

'Wanted. Specialist magician for private illusion.' He looked at me without saying a word. 'That's it. Same message each time. Mobile number. We get a few other applications, but I say we've filled the position.'

I'd given him what he wanted. Now time to get rid of him. 'That's it. That's all I know. All I have to do. Now please leave.'

He moved towards me and I found myself backing into my office.

'What's he look like?'

'I've never seen him. I wouldn't know.'

'But you've met him?'

'Once. That's all. A long time ago. He was in disguise.'

'Describe him.'

'That'll be client privilege. I can't do that. Please leave.'

‘Even if I said pretty please and was terribly persuasive?’

‘No.’ I was now at my desk and could not get around it, away from his stare.

My desk was tidy, I always like to keep it like that. Neat containers for pens and pencils, a letter opener next to the writing pad. A stapler next to the coffee cup mat.

‘Does your wife know what you do for a living?’ his voice was quiet.

‘My wife has nothing to do with this.’

He leaned in close to me and moved his shirt to reveal the gun again. A blatant threat now. ‘Does your wife know what you do for a living?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘Why do you want to know?’

The stranger turned and pointed to a certificate on the office walls. ‘This the kid’s school?’ I nodded. ‘So she’s on the school run?’

I found myself nodding. I felt like such a coward. It was the gun. If it wasn’t for the gun.....

‘I asked you nicely. What does he look like?’

‘I told you nicely, I do not know!’

I was now pressed with my back against my desk. My hands were flat on its surface as he leaned into me, forcing me to bend backwards over the desk itself.

‘I tried this the nice way, now we have to try it the other.’

I didn’t see him move. But I felt a sharp pain in my hand. When I looked down, a pencil was sticking out of it. He’d driven it through the back of my hand. The pain came in a rush. I cried out. Ashamed at being such a wimp. I just wanted this man gone. It really hurt.

‘Give me a description of the man who calls himself, The Magician.’ He was still leaning over me.

‘I’ve only ever seen him in a disguise.’

‘Same disguise?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then give me a description of that.’

‘I...can’t. I just can’t....’

I heard a phone ring. He eased away from me with the smile back on his face. He pulled a mobile phone from his back pocket and looked at the screen. His smile grew wider as he pressed a few buttons. He turned the phone, so I could see the screen. I was nursing my hand. It was throbbing painfully, but thankfully little blood.

My heart almost stopped. There was a picture of my wife and daughter, with a terrified look on their faces. They were wearing the same clothes as they'd left the house earlier.

'You've kidnapped them!' my voice was shaky with fright.

His voice was calm as he said, 'We have all day. But we'll take one finger every five minutes until you give us what we want.'

My last reserve of resistance had gone. My wife and daughter were the last straw.

'Let them go.' I said, far too quietly.

'A description?' I nodded. I had to.

He fiddled with his phone and I heard some bleeping. I was pressing my hand and pulled some tissues from the box on my desk and wrapped them around the wound. The pencil was still sticking out. I dare not do anything with it. I needed a doctor!

The stranger looked at me and pointed to his phone. 'I've an artist on the other end here, and he'll take your description and make it look real. Are you ready?'

I felt so dejected. 'What've you done with my wife and daughter?' I was almost pleading.

He smiled. This time the steel wasn't there. 'They're safe. We've just pulled them over. We'll let them go in a few minutes. Just give the artist the description.'

All I could remember was that The Magician looked around fifty, overweight. He had cloudy eyes, receding hair, but long at the back. Light brown it was. Eyes, greyish. Chubby cheeks. About five-foot-ten, I suppose.

It took fifteen minutes, but every now and then the sketch would be held up to a phone somewhere and the stranger would show me the image. On the small screen, it was very difficult to see. But after several tries, it was as good as I could remember. The stranger must have believed me because he spoke on the phone to the artist.

'Thanks for that. Now finish up that sketch, add a little colour if you can. Then do another one. Take some fat off the face. Make him younger, more hair. Darker hair perhaps. This guy is into make-up and disguise. Do what you can. Yeah. You too. Many thanks.'

He stood and looked at me. I felt the fear again. My hand was throbbing

‘I’ll put an advert in the paper and if he contacts you, you’ll let me know immediately. I’ll leave this number for you to call.’ He held a piece of paper up for me to see.

‘He won’t call.’ I said quietly. A part of me regretting that he wouldn’t. I wanted this to be over. I felt such a coward.

‘Let’s hope he does, otherwise, it’ll be on the national news - a great tragedy at your house. That’ll get his interest up. He’ll come then, wouldn’t he?’

The fear was intense now. I tried to be casual. ‘I doubt it. These guys are very insular and care only for themselves.’

‘This one isn’t like that. He has friends. He comes when they call.’

‘This was only business. We’re not friends.’

‘Then you’d better hope the sketch will do it then.’

He stood there and sent a text. I saw his shirt ride up his arm and noticed a tattoo. “The Fabulous Baker Boys”. The Movie? No. I memorised it and would think about it later.

‘My wife?’ I was almost pleading with him.

His smile was back as he put the phone away. ‘On her way.’

He leant close to me and I could smell alcohol on his breath. Clearly, I could see he hadn’t shaved for several days and his skin looked blotchy. He brandished a scrap of paper with a flourish and said, ‘If you think of anything else. Call this number. If you know what’s good for you and your family, you’d better make sure I know as much as you do about The Magician.’

My tormentor placed the paper gently on the desk and put the cup containing the pens and pencils on top to anchor it. He walked out the front door without a glance back. He closed it quietly behind him.

I grabbed my handset and speed-dialled my wife with my good hand. There was no reply. Fear, intense and painful. Overriding the pain in my hand. I was close to tears. I called emergency and asked for an ambulance. I tried my wife again.

I heard a car and ran to the door. My wife and daughter ran into my arms. Both were sobbing. Soon I joined them.

They were horror-struck at the sight of the pencil sticking out of my hand. I’ll never forget that look on their faces. I felt at the lowest point in my life. From this point onwards I felt that all our lives had changed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WILLOUGHBY

It was a piece of luck I was walking down the main stairs when the doorbell rang.

As I waited for Herbert to answer the door, I was looking through the mail that remained on the hallway dresser. None for me, but I was just curious who the visitor was. You never know....

I could only hear a faint conversation as Herbert always whispered. But he opened the door and showed the visitor into the study.

I saw a youngish man, in his thirties perhaps. Dark curly hair and very tanned and lined skin. He'd a slightly foreign look about him I couldn't put my finger on. I put him as a sailor, or captain perhaps on a fishing boat. He was dressed in clean jeans and a golf shirt. His trainers looked new.

He glanced casually at me with no sign of recognition. Herbert began his slow journey to find the Colonel. My curiosity had peaked now. I hung about until Herbert returned with Charles.

Charles saw me sorting through the mail and waved me into his office, or Study, as they liked to call it in the mansion.

As we walked in, the visitor was standing with his hands gently clasped in front of him. He nodded to both of us and waited for one of us to speak. Charles couldn't help himself.

'I'm Colonel Charles Ryce-Hardin. My colleague Jamison Willoughby. What can we do for you...Mr....?'

The man's eyes swept over both of us and rested on Charles. His voice was soft and with a slight American accent. It took a few sentences for me to try to guess where he was from. But I was sure from its slightly cultured tones it was from somewhere near Boston.

'Thank you for seeing me unannounced, Mr Ryce-Hardin. I wonder if you'd be so kind as to answer a few questions for me?'

'If I can. Please take a seat.' Charles said waving to one of the three guest chairs.

The visitor waved away the offer and said, 'No thanks. I much prefer to stand. Is this room comfortable for you to conduct business, Mr Ryce-Hardin?'

I saw Charles frown a little. I assume at the word business.

'As comfortable as anywhere. Now....what did you want to ask?'

‘My name is Tay Yah Michigan. Tay Yah spoke as in *Tea Leoni*, the actress. Don’t ask. My mother was confused. My father, more so.’

‘Tay Yah?’ Charles said slowly.

‘That’ll do. I’m a private investigator and I’m particularly interested in a man who calls himself, The Magician.’

I saw Charles straighten up his back. I realised I was holding my breath, so I let it out slowly.

‘But I’m here primarily to ask some questions about the deaths of your son and daughter, Mr Ryce-Hardin. Justin and Naomi. Do you have a few minutes, so we can talk?’

I saw Charles was shaken. I was certainly confused.

Michigan went on unaware of the effect his statement had on the two of us. ‘I’m more concerned that your remaining daughter, Samantha, may be part of the same scenario as her siblings.’

I watched Charles’s expression change. I saw fear and anxiety there. He said, ‘How could you possibly think that....’

Michigan held up a hand and tried to smile, badly, before saying, ‘Please don’t shoot the messenger, sir. I’ve uncovered information that the man called The Magician has currently become active again. Something triggered his retirement. I hope to find out what, but in the meantime, I feel Samantha should be more.....protected.’

Charles sat in the chair next to Michigan and I took a seat.

‘Has she met anyone new recently? Acting strange?’

Charles let out a bark of a laugh as he said, ‘She always acts strangely. She’s a teenager with elderly parents.’

Michigan nodded and said, ‘I’m sure. Teenagers, eh? I was one of them once. Didn’t like it then, don’t like them now. Anyway.... Has she been talking about someone new in her life? When she leaves the house is she alone, meets anyone? What’s her normal schedule? Say...over one week?’

Charles was struggling to think. He was becoming more confused.

I spoke up, breaking this obvious plan to monopolise and manipulate the conversation. ‘Who did you say you were working for?’

‘I didn’t. And I can’t. I cannot reveal my client. Enough to say it’s not an individual, more an organisation.’

He turned his stare back to Charles as he said, ‘For the next few weeks I’d advise you to concentrate more security on your daughter. Perhaps your wife too. I’ve reason to believe The Magician has taken a

sudden interest in your family, Mr Ryce-Hardin, Colonel. To ignore this information may put you and your family at risk.'

Charles was looking at the floor shaking his head.

'What's their plans for the next week or two, sir?' Michigan asked softly.

Charles looked up in a daze. 'Who?'

'Your daughter. And your wife too.'

'I don't know. You know kids.....'

Michigan leaned forward and said quietly, 'Does she have a Facebook account? Is she on Twitter?'

Charles was looking up now. 'Did you just say you had information on The Magician?' Michigan nodded. 'Do you know where he is? Who he is?' Michigan shook his head.

'Not yet but getting nearer all the time. Facebook? Twitter?'

Charles nodded and stood up. He walked around his desk and activated his computer. He typed in the password and started opening icons from the desktop.

'I can just about manage this malarkey. God knows why a retired Colonel needs a Facebook account, but the army likes it. Here. I think I've got this right. Take a look.'

Charles stood back from the computer to let Michigan take a look. Michigan waved his hand at Charles and said, 'No need for me to see your private information, sir. But if you could give us both an idea what her plans are. It might help if I was to get any advanced Intel that matches his whereabouts and theirs.'

Charles struggled to understand the information on both accounts, but he relayed what places they were supposed to be going to and friends they were meeting. Michigan wrote carefully into a small notepad with a pencil.

I asked, 'Who's ordered this investigation?'

'My client.'

'And you won't say who that is?'

'Can't. Can't say who that is. Sorry. If you'd like to take some advice, Colonel, sir. Is there anyone who might accompany your family while they're away from the house?'

Charles was shaking his head. I heard myself saying, 'Tamm and Nick?'

Charles was shaking his head.

‘Just give it some thought, sir.’ said Michigan, closing his notebook.

I had to ask, ‘So you’re looking for this....Magician?’ He nodded, putting his notebook away in the back pocket of his neatly pressed jeans. ‘Who is he and what does he look like?’

‘Not met him. If I knew that I’d probably close this case by tomorrow. Do you have any ideas?’

Charles was now paying attention. I assumed he saw a route to getting closer to the man we were hunting. ‘We have a sketch.’ He said moving towards a filing cabinet. Within moments he produced copies of the two sketches we had made. I thought this was not a good move. We were giving away too much info to this stranger. We were tipping our hand as it were.

‘Nice rendering. But how accurate they are...who knows? I’ve investigated The Magician’s case file. About forty assassinations in all. I’ve interviewed many people who’ve seen this man, in passing, from a distance, from the rear. None have described him like that. I understand he’s good with disguises. Who knows?’

I could see Charles look of disappointment. He was hoping Michigan would shout, ‘That’s him!’

‘What’re you going to do with these?’ Michigan asked looking at Charles as he handed them back.

Charles rushed in again without thought. He was becoming a desperate man. He saw in this stranger a hope that he might achieve his desires. I was not so sure. Yet. ‘We’re going to get them on national television. Offer a reward for the location and apprehension of this man.’

Michigan frowned and appeared in thought. ‘I’d think carefully before doing that, if I was you. My past experiences have shown inherent dangers with offering a reward. To start with..... you’ll have all the crazies coming out from under the rocks. They see the dollar signs and that drives them to your door. You’re going to spend a lot of energy and money sorting the wheat from the chaff. Most importantly, you’ll be wasting valuable time. Second, you’re not sure how accurate this sketch is. From my experience, I don’t think he looks like that. But hey, it’s your dime. If you do get a hit on someone that looks like him, how sure are you ever going to be it’s the right person? I’m assuming you don’t just want to shake the guy’s hand and wish him well? You make a mistake like that....the law can be pretty unforgiving. Especially as there are now several organisations keeping an eye on you.’

He looked directly at me when he said that. I felt a chill run up and down my spine. What did this man know about me?

'I'd advise caution in your approach to this. I'm not saying don't do it. Just saying...there are pitfalls.'

I was about to question exactly what he meant by organisations keeping an eye on me, but he carried on.

'Thirdly. You need to be sure of your source. To my knowledge, no one has ever seen the real Magician, in the flesh so to speak. I don't know where you got this sketch from. Who described this man?' He pointed his finger at the disguised version sketch.

I wanted Charles to shut up now. He was giving this man too much information. Charles was not stoppable. 'A man who employed him and has met him several times. The second sketch is an interpretation of what he might look like.'

Michigan seemed to ponder awhile before saying. 'A man that employed him, you say. I know six agents who've done that. Only two are still alive. So it's one of two.'

'Who are the two you know?' I said quickly before Charles could blurt out Stone's name.

Michigan shrugged. 'As it's part of my investigation and the report isn't finished yet, I can't tell you. But you can still tell me. Any help I get can only bring us all nearer getting hold of this guy.'

I knew Charles was going to give away the name and could think of no way to stop him, without appearing over-secretive to this detective.

'A man named Stone.' Charles said quickly.

Michigan nodded. 'Orlando. Okay. Yes, he's met The Magician. I'm surprised he volunteered the information.'

I'm sure he could tell from the look on both our faces that *volunteered* was not the right way to phrase it.

Michigan had been wiping his eyes several times in the last few minutes. He smiled at Charles and said, 'If you'd excuse me a moment, please. New contact lenses. Can't get on with them.'

He bent forward and took each one out and put them into a small plastic container. From his jeans pocket, he pulled out a glasses case and slipped on a pair of dark framed spectacles. He blinked a few times and said, 'That's better.'

He moved and stood near the desk, resting his backside on it. His arms were crossed over his chest and he looked very relaxed as he said, 'You've no idea of what this man is capable of. As both of you are now on his radar.....you,' he pointed a finger directly at me. '..... for some reason, he felt it necessary to try to get you indicted for murder.'

That sent another chill down my spine, the intensity in his eyes and voice. I must have been staring at him open-mouthed.

He went on, 'You've had some very unsavoury dealings within The Brethren, haven't you, Mr Willoughby? Care to admit that to your business partner here?' He glanced at Charles.

His eyes were back on me again. 'It's no wonder the police are taking their time to put together a case against you. You've been very adept at covering your tracks. But given time and motivation, they will get there.'

I stammered, 'How do you.....'

'Of course, I can't just pursue this investigation without acknowledging the part The Brethren had to play in it. I understand you were a major part of that defunct organisation, Mr Willoughby? That makes this a long hard road for all of us.'

I tried to talk, but he went on without a pause.

'There are some reports, or should I say at the moment "rumours", that you may have hired The Magician yourself. Have you ever met him?'

'Of course, I haven't.' I could say that with conviction because I haven't. I wish I had. I could give a description then and get on with this charade.

He turned and pointed to Charles, 'And he is pissed at you, when both your offspring tried to kill him.'

Charles started to bluster.

'But you too have had some unsavoury dealings within the army haven't you, Mr Ryce-Hardin. Care to share any with your partner here?'

We were both silent, glancing at each other. I'm sure we both knew what the man said was correct and now the other knew it.

Michigan went on calmly, 'Time will reveal all your dirty little secrets, gentlemen.'

Charles started to bluster again.

I had to get him off the subject quickly and said, 'You seem to think you know a lot about us, but we know nothing about you? Why should we give you information?'

'So far, you've given me no information whatsoever. In fact, I think I've given you the information you didn't have before. A bit one-sided, if you ask me.'

I smiled and said, 'We're grateful for that. But we don't know who you are? Tea Michigan? Who are you?'

He paused and saw the puzzled looks on our faces. He resigned himself to an explanation that he must have done a thousand times before.

‘It’s Tay Yah. Not T, Mr Willoughby. My parents thought I was going to be a girl, so named me in advance. My father left on a tour for the American army and they thought he wasn’t coming back. When I was born a boy, my Asian mother didn’t have the heart to change the name. I like it pronounced Tay Yah. But you can call me Mr Michigan. Or if you want to be friendly, just Michigan.’

We must have looked still confused because he continued with, ‘The Christian name of Tay is of Italian or Greek origin. Short form of Teresa and Teadora.’ He saw we were still silent. ‘Its meaning is a “goddess or gift of God”. Enough about my history. It’s a screwed up as anybody’s. You don’t want to hear about me. Now, back to matters at hand.’

I wasn’t going to let him fob us off with old history. I wanted to know what he knew about The Magician. I needed to know who he was and who was paying him. How did he know so much about Charles and me? If he had that sort of info, perhaps he’d plenty on The Magician we could use.

‘Do you have a card, Michigan?’ I said as casually as I could.

‘Perhaps I should’ve told you earlier. This is not a sanctioned investigation. So ...obviously....there’s no need for me to be associated with you both. This meeting never happened. And that’s best for all of us. I hope you understand. However, I will, off the record, let you know how the investigation is progressing. I trust that’s all right with you?’

Charles suddenly found his voice, ‘Who do you work for?’

‘I certainly cannot tell you that. Client privileges and so forth.’

‘It’s not the police, though. Is it?’ I ventured.

‘If it was the police, I’d be obliged to give them enough information to have you on trial by tomorrow. No, it’s not the police.’

Another chill rippled through me.

‘What’re you doing here?’ Charles demanded.

‘I came to see you, Colonel. Mr Willoughby was an...added bonus. I was coming to visit you next, Mr Willoughby.’

‘Then what exactly do you want from us?’ Charles persisted.

‘I’ve a gap in my knowledge. Before I fill in my report, there are some grey areas. I was hoping you could fill them in for me?’

‘Such as?’ I said holding my breath. I was now getting fearful at what this man was going to reveal about both of us. He knew far too much.

He looked straight at me as he said, 'Why did you send Justin and Naomi to their deaths at the hands of the hitman known as The Magician?'

The words hit me full force. It was my turn to bluster now. 'I...I....'

'Where did Justin go? I believe it was abroad. But Naomi never left London.' Michigan was speaking slowly and softly, but his eyes never wavered from my face. He was reading me, looking for lies.

I remained silent. Damned if I argued, damned if I didn't. I could see Charles now looking at me with concern on his face.

I wanted to change the direction of this conversation but couldn't find a way. I felt I was on the defensive. 'As I told the police. I was made aware, after the events, that one of my associates was involved in all this. I'd nothing to do with it. I wouldn't. I just...wouldn't.'

He was staring at me, his eyes wider and slightly obscured by the glasses he now wore.

There was the sound of a mobile phone. No one moved. Michigan kept his eyes on me as he took out his mobile from his pocket. He had a quick glance at the screen and then looked at Charles.

'Sorry about this interruption. I normally don't hold with conversations being interrupted by calls. But this looks urgent. I think we all want to know what this caller wants.'

I felt my pulse quicken. Was it his client?

'But I would ask for some privacy while I answer it first. If I may?'

Charles was non-plussed. I realised Michigan wanted the room to himself, or we could ask him to leave the room and we remain behind. I looked at Charles, who stood and walked out the door. He motioned me with his head to follow. We needed to talk.

I closed the door on Michigan and could just make out his voice. I stood and listened with my ear to the door for a moment. I heard the name 'Magician' and 'Colonel'.

Charles pulled at my arm. 'How does he know so much about...us?' I shrugged. 'If he's so close to catching The Magician, we need to be near him. We can let him lead us straight to him.'

I thought the sentiment was right but wasn't too sure how we were going to accomplish that. Was there anything we could offer him? He wasn't about to just give us anything.

I whispered, 'Let's not upset him. Keep him on our side. We must stay in touch with him.' Charles nodded.

The indistinct voice on the other side of the door had stopped. Charles and I looked at each other and moved away from the door. We didn't want him to think we were eavesdropping.

Michigan opened the door with a frown on his face. His mobile still in his hand. 'Are either of you aware of where Justin is at the moment?'

I saw a look of fear cross Charles's face but hoped Michigan wouldn't notice it as guilt.

'No.' I said quickly.

'Well then. I might now have some information of interest to you.'

My heart was pounding again. I managed, 'Really? What?'

'I've just got news of a skirmish in a small village in Hungary. It's reported The Magician was involved. There were deaths, but he wasn't amongst them.'

'How did you find this out?'

'After all these years I've vast resources and a network of informants. They also reported the Magician to be seen in a small provincial airfield in Buckinghamshire.' Charles and I looked at each other again. 'Are you sure this is all news to you?'

'Yes, first we've heard. Budapest? Why?' I hoped I hadn't given away any knowledge by saying Budapest. Surely everyone knew Budapest was in Hungary. Didn't they?

'I was hoping one of you would know the answer to that.' said Michigan with a frown on his face. This emphasised the deep creases in his skin.

This investigator knows too much, but does he know *enough* to help us find The Magician?

It suddenly struck me what he said when he came out of the office. 'What did you mean about where is Justin?'

'Oh. Well, I have to confirm everything, but it is possible....I don't want to get your hopes up...It's possible Justin went to Budapest.'

Charles' face sagged, and his head dropped. He should say something. Show interest, concern. But he was already past that set of emotions. I had to cover up.

'How sure are you of this? Who told you?'

The frown left his face, and he almost smiled. 'This source has not always been reliable in the past.'

'Did he say he actually SAW The Magician?' I hoped I wasn't too keen.

‘I don’t think anyone has ever MET him. Unless in a disguise that is. I’m not sure if anyone was actually to meet this guy, they’d know they’d actually had met him. So, upon reflection, I think your sketch is suspect, at best.’

I had to ask, ‘How can we trust what you say, Mr Michigan?’

‘You don’t have to. I’ve been after this man for over ten years. I’ve got this close....’ He held his fingers inches apart, ‘...but he wriggled away. I’ve every reason to want to catch him. As much reason as either of you two. Perhaps, with a little cooperation, we can catch him together. Pool our resources and knowledge, so to speak.’

This sounded more hopeful. He wanted to involve us. ‘What will you do when you catch him?’ I asked.

‘I’m paid to find him. I’ll notify my clients, then it’s their problem.’

I looked at Charles for support as I said, ‘If we paid you, would you let us know when you find him?’

The answer was quick in coming and quite abrupt. ‘No.’

‘So, who’s your client?’ I said trying to catch him off guard.

‘I can’t tell you that, can I?’

‘So....could we hire you to work for us?’ I said quietly and as sincerely as I could.

He smiled and said, ‘Of course you could.’ I looked at Charles who gave the faintest of nods. ‘As soon as I’ve finished this case, I’ll be available again.’

‘Can we pay you to let us have the information as you acquire it? Or could you tell us where The Magician is before you notify your client?’

‘No.’ Again, delivered abruptly. ‘Unlike you two gentlemen I have scruples, an honesty. And I have a conscience too. I’m paid by my client and that’s all I work towards.’ He smiled at me. ‘But I’ll bear in mind your offers. I’ll add them to my report.’

I hesitated before saying, ‘Could we purchase a copy of your report?’

The smile vanished as he said, ‘You know the answer to that.’ He wiped his spectacles with a white handkerchief. ‘I’ve been given the nickname, “The Bulldog”. Because once I set my teeth into something, I never let go. So do either of you know why Justin and Naomi were after the Magician and do you know where Justin is right now? So an answer, please. Or an outright denial will do.’

Charles looked away and said, ‘No.’ softly.

I shook my head and said, ‘No.’ more firmly.

Michigan shrugged and put his phone away. He started to walk towards the front door.

‘Oh...one other thing. Do either of you know anything about a...notebook or diary, Justin might have had on him?’

I could feel Charles take a deep breath. I was conscious I hadn’t breathed easily for several minutes. I just shook my head. Charles followed suit. I would have to ask Charles if he found anything on the body when it was brought back.

‘Well, I must be on my way. I suggest you make an electronic sweep of your home every day.’ said Michigan softly, pulling out a pad and making a note with a pencil.

Charles nodded, and I tried to smile. Michigan turned his back and walked towards the door. He stopped and turned slowly.

‘One more thing. Do either of you upstanding gentlemen know someone called...Elle?’

Both shook our heads. My heart stopped. That was my nickname in prison! I was only there for a few weeks, but these people like to dehumanise you as much as possible. Giving nicknames, sometimes silly, sometimes reflective of what you do for a living, or did as a crime.

Michigan had the door open and turned to us again. ‘No? Okay. I’m sure we’ll meet again.’

That sent chills down my spine. I looked at Charles and I could tell this visit had affected him badly.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ORLANDO STONE

For the last few days, I'd lost all heart for my work.

During my years as an agent, I'd met many violent men. Criminals, psychopaths, murderers. But all of them treated me with respect. To be attacked in my own home came as a great shock to me. To have my family abducted was unacceptable.

But what was I to do about it? What CAN I do about it? The answer to both – nothin'!

I'm now afraid to let my family out on their own. But what good would I be if they were attacked again? Useless. I'm not a coward, more...know my limitations. If there's a gun involved....I'm outta there.

I didn't want to up-sticks and disappear. Susie is doing well at school and Carol enjoys the lifestyle she'd set up for us. Everything is going too well to quit the neighbourhood. I kept telling myself the thug didn't need to return. I'd told him all I know. But would he believe that when he got nowhere with The Magician?

There seemed to me only one route left for me to take. I had to overcome my fear of guns. I thought about hypnotherapy. But I have a fear of that too. That left me with one option and that's what I did today.

I went to a gun range.

I was sweating and my heart pounding. It's an irrational fear. I don't know where it comes from, childhood experience, or what. I only know I've always been terrified by guns. I explained all this to Dick Powell, the man I'd hired to give me a lesson on how to shoot a handgun.

He sympathised and said he gets that a lot. Some people come here to "blow shit up". Others to understand what it's like to use a firearm. Others because they feel they can defend themselves and loved ones if the time ever came. He was patient and slow and we worked out the basic principle of how to hold a weapon and how to squeeze the trigger. The thing I held in my hand was made of plastic. It seemed dormant and non-threatening. But then...it would never go BANG!

I started to sweat more as we headed for the counter and he asked me to select a weapon. I wanted to say give me the biggest, badass gun you have. But I had a mountain to climb, I didn't want to carry another mountain with me. I chose the smallest. A .22 Remington – I think he called it.

He selected a box of shells and gave me a large set of ear protectors.

‘You’re gonna need these.’ He said. Not realising that this was the root of my problem. The noise.

Fortunately for me, the range was empty. It had half a dozen small stalls that looked down a vast room. In the distance were boards that would hold the targets. He selected a booth and clipped a large paper target onto a board. It had a dark area the shape of a man’s head and upper torso. Over the heart a series of concentric coloured circles. I think the intention was to get a bullet in the centre circle. If I could hit anywhere on the paper it’d be a miracle.

He pushed a button and held his finger on it. A loud whirr signalled the journey the target was making down range. It seemed forever before he released the mechanism and left me with my first look at what I was going to shoot. It looked a long way away.

He patiently showed me how to load the shells. He slapped the magazine in the handle and handed it to me. ‘Always point the gun down range.’ He was totally unaware of how much effort it took for me to take the gun. The first time in my life I’d held a weapon. I could see my hand shaking. So could he. Right now he must be fearing for his safety as well as mine.

He gave me a friendly smile and took a step back. If I was him, I would’ve left the room. I went through the stance again. Knees bent, right hand on the butt, left hand folded over it, thumb forward pointing. Finger off the trigger until ready to fire.

Relax. Stop shaking and aim.

The end of the gun was waving so much I had to drop my arms. He saw my distress and smiled again. ‘Let me show you, Orlando.’

He went through the stance again. Told me how to sight the gun and I tensed as the next bit was the worse. Even through the ear defenders, the noise was very loud. Sharp, harsh and shocking. Sending fear rippling through me. I hated it. I was now shaking all over.

‘Are you all right, sir?’ he said kindly.

No, I wasn’t. But I didn’t make all this effort to turn around and leave. I held my hand out for the gun and I could see in his eyes something that ...somehow comforted me. He seemed sympathetic and as if...he understood. That made me feel slightly better.

Once again, with shaking hands, I held the weapon, aimed and slid my finger onto the trigger. Despite everything he said, I closed my eyes as I squeezed.

The bang, when it came, was just as loud and just as frightening. But there was one major difference. I HAD MADE IT HAPPEN.

I opened my eyes and looked at Dick, he smiled. ‘That wasn’t so bad now, was it?’

I think I smiled as I looked at the target. I’d clearly missed. I could see the neat hole he’d made near the centre.

‘Try again, Orlando. This time...try to keep your eye open.’ He was grinning. He’d seen this rookie mistake many times, I’m sure.

I took a long deep breath and allowed my determination to rise to the top of my conscious. I stood, I aimed, finger on the trigger, one eye open. Breath out slowly, hold the breath. And squeeze.

Again the fear as the gun went off. But not so bad. Noticeably so. And I kept my eye OPEN!

Dick slapped me on the back but waved the gun away from him as I turned to face him. He gently pushed the gun and my hands onto the bench. I let go the gun and took the time to get my breath back.

Damn, if I wasn’t smiling.

I stayed another thirty minutes firing that weapon. I got through fifty bullets and in the end firing them in groups of five. I was finally hitting the target. Not the bull, but not too far off.

I was feeling much better. This was the way to go, hypnotherapy wouldn’t have worked. Doing the thing I feared was the only way. I’d climbed my mountain. The last shell was ejected, and I lay the gun on the counter. Dick was smiling as he started to put the gun back in its carrying box. I took off my defenders and my world collapse around me.

Others were using the range now. I was vaguely aware of them as I was firing. I’d been so intense that I didn’t take much notice. But with the defenders off, the noise was horrific. I screamed and held my ears. Dick quickly slipped them back on for me.

I was almost on my knees in fear. Dick pulled me up and pushed his face into mine. ‘One more, Orlando. One more shot. Come on.’

Before I realised what he was doing he’d pulled out his own weapon from a tiny holster on his belt. He’d flipped the safety off and thrust it into my hand.

‘Now. Fire, five.’

My ears were ringing and my mind racing. Heart pumping, but he seemed so urgent I couldn’t refuse.

The gun was bigger and heavier, but the principle of firing it remained the same. I stood, aimed and squeezed, without even drawing a breath. The kick was bigger, the noise louder, but the bullets hit the target. I was surrounded by silence.

My breath now coming in short bursts. I carefully laid the gun on the counter and Dick was grinning. He slapped me on the shoulder as he picked up his weapon, pushed on the safety and eased it into his holster.

I felt I was in the Wild West and had just outdrawn and killed a gunfighter. I even managed a smile.

All the way home I had a grin on my face. I analysed everything that had happened to me, as I always do. I felt I'd overcome a large hurdle in my life. I could shoot a gun. If one was pointed at me, I'd still turn to jelly, but I'd be ready for the bang. I felt proud of myself. Some of my self-esteem had been restored.

As the garage door swung up, I noticed Carol's car had gone. I'd asked her not to go alone, but you know women. Well...I obviously don't. Susie was at school and I could pick her up later. But Carol must have gone shopping. I felt a slight guilt that I hadn't told her where I was going. I was sure I'd back out at the last moment and I'd have to admit that to her too.

She'd enough reason to think me a coward as it was. But she did fully realise that what I did was done to save them. I'm sure she was grateful for that. But she doesn't really understand why it's affected *me* so much.

I closed the garage door and went inside. She'd probably left a note on the fridge. I needed a drink of water and perhaps some crackers. All that excitement and gunplay made me hungry.

As I walked through the hallway towards the kitchen I passed the sitting room and caught sight of something that should not have been there.

A stranger.

My heart nearly stopped. I froze and tried to be calm. It wasn't the same man as before. That was a relief, of a kind.

This man looked in his mid-thirties, I guessed. His hair looked very dark against an almost olive skin. The face appeared deeply lined. He wore large dark framed spectacles. He was sitting in one of my chairs with an embarrassed smile.

He sat with his legs crossed over the neatest pair of blue jeans I've ever seen. Black trainers looked odd with white socks. Strange the things you notice when you're frightened. He had a white T-shirt which showed some muscular activity underneath it.

He stood up and held both hands out in a gesture of openness.

'Sorry for the surprise. But I rang the bell, and no one answered. The door was open and took the liberty....sorry to scare you. Mr Stone?'

The accent I placed as somewhere nearPhiladelphia?

‘Who the fuck are you and what are doin’ in my house?’ was my calm and thought-through reply.

‘I can understand your...disapproval. But it’s important I speak with you, Mr Stone. Do you have a minute?’

I slowed my breathing. He was clearly not carrying a gun. His T-shirt was tight over the jeans and there was nowhere to hide one.

‘What do you want?’ I said as forcefully as I could. My mind took off in a strange direction. I found myself thinking that if I had a gun in my hand now, I wouldn’t be frightened to point it at this intruder.

The thought both surprised and delighted me at the same time. It also had the effect of making me suddenly a lot bolder. After all, this was MY house. I wasn’t going to tolerate strangers coming in and threatening me. Not that this man showed any signs of a threat. Quite the opposite, he was soft-spoken and subservient.

‘I have a few questions I’d like you to answer, please.’

‘Who are you?’ I was in control now. I walked into the room and stood before him. I was taller and bulkier than him and looked the more threatening of the two of us.

‘My name is Tay Yah Michigan. Spelt like a cup of tea but pronounced Tay Yah. But you can call me, Mr Michigan. Or if you want to be friendly, just Michigan.’

‘Michigan?’ I said as if I was trying to place it amongst my long list of acquaintances. ‘Should I know you?’

‘Not at all. I’m a private investigator and need some help with my quest.’

‘You just broke into my home!’ I said retaining my position as the righteous homeowner.

‘Not at all. An uninvited guest, maybe. But the front door was open, and I did call. Several times. I thought that if it wasn’t locked, someone would be along soon. And here you are. Thankfully.’

Had Carol forgotten to lock the front door? After all we’d discussed about security! I need to have a word, or two with her.

Michigan stood and watched me. The ball was in my court. ‘What questions?’

He seemed to take a deep breath before saying, ‘I understand you’ve had a visit recently and gave a description of a man known only as The Magician. I’d very much like to hear that description for myself.’

‘It’s an incident I’d rather not talk about.’ I was nursing my hand as the painful memories returned. The bandage felt soft, yet coarse as I massaged it.

‘I assume the interview was painful in several ways?’

‘I’m deeply embarrassed by the whole thing. Next question?’

‘I’d like you to tell me, as much as you feel you can, about any meeting you had with The Magician. Details. Description, what he said, what you said. Time and dates. Anything that can add to my knowledge of the man I’m looking for.’

‘I’ve just told you, I won’t discuss that again. Now please leave.’

He pointed towards my model. ‘I noticed you’re building a ship there. My guess is, it’s the “Surprise.”?’

I was taken aback at his knowledge. The surprise turned to anxiety as he moved nearer to inspect it closely. He held his hands behind his back. A sign he had no intention of touching it. He looked closely and slowly at the detail.

‘Why this ship, Mr Stone?’

‘I love the movie the ship was depicted in.’

‘Master and Commander.’ Michigan said nodding. ‘Built 1974 by the French. Captured and renamed the Surprise by the British in.....around 1796. Her real claim to fame was in action against the....’ He struggled for the name.

‘Hermoine.’ I said, fascinated by his knowledge. ‘Porto Cavallo.’ I added.

He looked more closely at the rigging as he said, ‘The embodiment of persistence and might. That’s what they said about her in those days.’

‘I believe they did. You have an interest in naval history, Mr Michigan?’

‘I’m interested in many things. I think this shows fine craftsmanship on your part, Mr Stone.’

I’m not open to flattery but appreciated his attempt. A nagging thought had been troubling me and I took this opportunity during his blatant attempt at distraction to voice an opinion.

‘So we meet again.’ I said as casually as I could.

‘Pardon me?’

‘I said we meet again. Tea Michigan. Very poor anagram of The Magician, don’t you think?’

'I don't know about poor. But you've figured it out.'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah. But why do you think we've met before?'

I looked at him to see if he was kidding me. 'You disguise your nickname with an anagram. You *are* The Magician, and yes you know we've met before. Cut the crap.'

'We've never met before.'

'Then what's with the anagram?'

The Magician sighed and sat on one of my more comfortable chairs in the sitting room. 'My real name is Chris Greenwood. I'm a private investigator based in Philadelphia...' I knew it! '...and over ten years ago I started my mission to find the assassin who calls himself, The Magician.'

'Bullshit!' I said with a grin on my face. I knew it was Philadelphia!

'I specialise in long-term investigations. So I adopt an alter ego for each case. It helps keeping me focused. Once on the trail of The Magician, Tea Michigan was the best I can do. If you can come up with something better, I'll consider it.'

'Bullshit!' I said again, without a smile this time.

He shrugged. 'Look me up. Go ahead. I'll wait.'

It was a challenge. Did he expect me to just believe him? I walked into the office, aware he was walking slowly behind me. I opened the laptop and fired it up. He stood away from me, so my password was not readable, even from the finger positioning. I opened the browser and looked at him.

'Web address?'

'Any address I gave you could be false. Any fool can set up a one-off website. Google it. That way you'll know it's genuine.'

I thought about that. Not sure all of that was true. But he did make a good point. I Googled, 'Tea Michigan'. I got eight hits. All through different sources, some Forum responses and the main website. I clicked through to the site. It was plain and simple. Brief, slightly...arrogant I'd say. No photograph. A list of investigative types of work undertaken. Mostly missing people. Lost relatives. Some money trailing. A short list of potential clients he'd be interested in interviewing. Government agencies. Footsie 100 companies. Not selling himself very well at all. A single contact point was an email address. I bookmarked the site.

He seemed very relaxed and his voice low and casual. 'These days information's a lot easier to come by, don't you think? Where would we be without the Internet? For instance, I've collected a lot of information about *you*.'

I looked up. His face was neutral. He was standing relaxed, his hands behind his back. Occasionally he would rock slowly back on his heels or wipe his eyes with a handkerchief. He seemed almost at home.

‘You came from Chicago. Afro-American by birth. Currently filling the hole left by Milo and Luca’s demise.’

I reacted sharply at the sound of their names. ‘You knew them?’ I asked.

He shook his head, ‘Didn’t know them, but am trying to find out what happened to them and The Magician’s name keeps popping up. I’m dying to meet the legend.’

I was half listening to him and trying to absorb the details from the website. There was little detail on the page. I decided to concentrate on what Michigan was saying. Or could he really be The Magician?

‘It seems to me, that you’re a man of ethics, so totally in the wrong trade. I believe you’ve always made the preliminary investigations into the targets, ensuring they’re justified, if not in your own mind, then that of the client’s. Before you hand over a sanction, you’re sure it’s a worthy elimination. The planet will be bettered by the loss of some people. Don’t you agree?’

I was unsure how to respond. ‘Continue.’ I said as neutrally as I could.

‘I’ve confirmed information that you’ve used The Magician. Several times. So you’ve met him. Spoke with him.’

‘But wouldn’t KNOW him.’ I said angrily.

‘But you HAVE met him. Which is more than I have.’ He smiled as he said, ‘After ten years I’ve built up a huge database of information. I’ve a string of people, all somehow connected to The Magician. One by one they give me another piece to the puzzle. I’d like to be able to add you to that list of Santa’s little helpers.’

‘I cannot give away trade secrets ever again. The last time I was being tortured, my wife and child were kidnapped, and all sorts of things threatened. I broke down. I gave in. I’ll regret that for the rest of my life. But to divulge information....not ever again. I must regain my pride and credibility.’

‘I would’ve done the same. I’d have told them more if I could.’

‘But we’re not the same are we?’

‘I don’t know. Probably not.’

There was a moment’s silence which I broke by saying, ‘Can I get you a drink? Water, tea?’ I smiled at the accidental joke.

He shook his head. 'No thanks. Look....could you tell me *anything* about the meetings you had with The Magician? Nothing that contravenes your sensitivity, or your pride in keeping secrets. What do you THINK this man is like? As a man? As a human being? What impression did you get from him?'

I shook my head. 'I've said too much. Not again.'

'Okay. It was a simple question. I don't think it contravenes your beliefs. So let's say....if you answer my question, without any additional trauma...I'll tell you who took your wife and daughter.'

I felt my blood run cold. How would he know? Who was this guy?

'You know?' I stuttered.

'I know. I'm not asking for something you haven't told before. Just ...I need to hear it for myself. Second-hand reports...nah. What do you say?'

'You're asking me to talk about someone I don't even know!'

'Every little detail counts. After ten years, I still have so little. I missed Luca and Milo by days. Both dead. Both by The Magician. You actually *met* this guy!' His voice was almost pleading.

'Only three times.'

'Four. You met him four times.'

I felt the chill again. How did he know? 'No, three. I should know.' It *was* four, but I didn't want him to think he knew everything.

'Okay, three. What did he look like?'

'How do you know who took my wife?' I was getting anxious to know if he really did know or was trying a scam on me.

'I can see how it's hard to believe the extent of my knowledge. But here goes. The man that came to your house here. Describe him to me.'

I was even more dubious now. He was supposed to know, now he's asking me! 'I can't remember.'

Michigan shrugged. 'You can't remember the man that stabbed your hand?'

I was rubbing it again. I stopped. It was a guess about my hand. Had to be.

'So was he.....not very tall, slight build? Asian?' I shook my head. 'Okay, a white man, slim, lots of tattoos?' I nodded. 'Humm, would one of them be, "The Fabulous Baker Boys"?'

Without thinking I blurted out, 'Yes!'

‘Then the Asian guy lifted your family. Now...do we have a deal or not?’

I’d run out of excuses with this man. He knew so much already. I felt I was not giving away info I shouldn’t. I made up my mind.

So I took my time and tried to recall everything I saw and heard while I was in the company of The Magician. He wrote everything down in a notebook with a pencil that he took from my desk cup. I shivered as he did this.

After what seemed like hours but was only minutes – I really didn’t have much I could tell him – he closed his notebook.

‘Now your side of the bargain?’ I asked harshly.

The visitor stretched his arms out in front of him and looked at me. He was considering how much to tell me. He slowly replaced the pencil in the pot and slid the notebook into a back pocket.

‘I’ve a long and detailed investigation. Ten years so far, and still not really any nearer. I feel obliged to put everything in my report for my client. What I find out I like to double check, so I know my facts are right. I’m correct in everything I said about you. Right?’

I remained non-committal.

‘I know I’m right. But there are things that I’ve found out, that I shouldn’t be sharing with other people.’

‘Now wait a minute....’ I objected. I could see he was wriggling out of our agreement.

He held a hand up and continued. ‘So what I’m saying has to be off my report. This meeting never happened. Do you agree to that?’

It was an easy thing to agree to. I nodded.

‘Say it.’ He said quickly.

‘I agree this meeting never happened. And you didn’t tell me anything.’

‘Okay. We can proceed. What I’m about to tell you...well...you have gained from TV news and brilliant deduction. Understood?’ I nodded. Get on with it.

‘If you’ve seen the news a few months ago, you’ll remember the case of a young girl found dead in the trunk of a car.’ I nodded. I did remember. ‘Man named Willoughby was arrested for her murder, but set free later?’ Again I nodded.

I remember all of it. I know of Willoughby. He’d approached me once for a contract. I didn’t like the setup, so I passed, saying I was too busy. Or

something like that. I probably knew more about him than this Bounty Hunter did.

‘Willoughby has teamed up with a money man, by the name of Charles Ryce-Hardin. Heard of him?’

Here I had to think. The name was familiar.

‘His daughter was the girl in the car?’ A bell rang. Yes, I remembered. I nodded. Where was this going?

‘Willoughby claimed he was framed and is out on bail. Charles has a son called Justin, who is missing. Presumed dead. In my opinion, now somewhere in Hungary. Willoughby had a group of associates which formed the suspect organisation called The Brethren. You must have heard of them?’ I nodded. ‘All members blown up by a bomb, while he was in gaol. He was supposed to be with them.’ Michigan said quickly.

‘Where are you going with this?’ I said stepping closer to this man.

‘The son, Justin, is missing, the daughter murdered. Ryce-Hardin has a grudge. Willoughby, all his associates murdered and him lucky to escape death. He has a grudge. Both men looking for the cause of their grudges....’

‘The Magician?’ I ventured.

‘The same. Both looking for the same man as I am. But they got to you first....’

‘Ryce-Hardin and Willoughby sent those men here?’ I felt a touch of my old friend fear again.

‘Well... They sent their thugs, a man named Jonny Tamm, who snagged your family. And Nick Baker, of “The Fabulous Baker Boys”, who gave you a memento of his visit.’

Now I knew why it didn’t seem so important. I wasn’t able to do anything about it, but I did feel some closure on who and why. ‘Will they come back?’

He shrugged. ‘Unlikely. Depends on what you told them.’

‘No more than I told you. I just don’t know....’

He tried to smile. ‘They’re pursuing your information. So I hope for your sake there’s nothing more to say.’

I ignored this threat. ‘None of you will find him. You know that, don’t you?’ I said quietly.

‘No. I don’t know that. If I thought that, I’d have to give up ten years of work and admit defeat. I’ll find him.’ The man’s eyes were sad behind the heavy-rimmed glasses.

‘He’s retired. He won’t surface again. I’m sure.’

‘You’re wrong. He’s surfaced, in Hungary a few weeks ago. Again in Buckinghamshire a few weeks ago. I’ve a fresh trail which I’m following.’

I shrugged. ‘Good luck.’

‘Thanks. I need it.’

He turned to go, and I said, ‘So you track this man down, after ten years. You have him cornered. What you gonna do? Shoot him?’

Michigan shook his head. ‘Nope. Just call my client and take advice from them.’

‘If they say shoot him, what do you do?’

‘They won’t say shoot. I won’t shoot. I don’t carry a gun. I hate them.’

‘Me too!’ I said with genuine pleasure. ‘But what if he comes at you? He’s the infamous Magician. He’s a killer. He’s out to kill you. What would you do?’

‘I’d Taser him. Nothing more.’

I had a thought, ‘I’m sure there are many law enforcement agencies that would like to get hold of him. Wouldn’t they pay you more for a warm body?’

‘I’m loyal to my clients.’

‘Pardon me, but this seems more personal than just a bounty hunt?’ I said.

He looked away and said so quietly I could only just hear him. ‘One of his victims was related to me. So I was the right man for the job. But that was years ago. I’ve learnt to move on from that.’ He waited to see if I had more questions. I didn’t. I had too much to think about and I wanted to do it alone. He opened the front door.

He said, ‘You should keep this locked you know.’ I nodded.

He walked out onto the steps.

‘That anagram thing.’ I asked. ‘Has nobody ever called you out on it?’

Michigan grinned and said, ‘Just one. You.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHARLES RYCE-HARDIN

I felt as if I'd been hit by the carrot AND the stick.

I felt my world had been turned upside down. I felt that getting my son back was somehow degrading and wrong. I felt my military honour was being questioned. I felt that my chosen partner was more corrupt than I first thought. But.... I also felt that I was a step nearer to the man I'd set my heart's desire on catching.

As the front door closed on the Detective fellow, my mind began to assimilate all the new details. It was like a whirlwind of information and ideas. Even Willoughby was silent with his own thoughts. We were both too shell-shocked to risk a potentially difficult conversation with each other.

I walked back into the study and poured myself a large Scotch. I dribbled some water in it and sat down. I sipped as I collected my thoughts together. I was aware that Willoughby had gone upstairs, probably to his room. Good. I needed personal space to think everything through.

Now the fellow had gone, what exactly did he have to say to us? Was that all he wanted, the answers to some bogus questions? What did he really know about us? Me, in particular. What could he possibly have found out about my military tours? Unless the Baker Boys had been talking...nothing. That was all locked away and hush hush. That was the way I planned it. That's the way it'll stay. No...I'm sure he was guessing about me. But Willoughby?

How much did he really know about The Magician? That's the thought train I wanted to ride. If he knew about Budapest, he may soon know about Justin's return. A connection would be made straight to me. Christ in a mosque! His grave was out there for anyone to see!

A thought entered my head and wouldn't leave. This man was too dangerous to be let running around. But on the other hand, he was the closest we were likely to come to catching The Magician. It was a quandary. We needed to get hold of the fellow and get him on our side. If he failed to co-operate...there was always Nicker.

But how to find him? He left no address, numbers...anything. He came and went as if I dreamt it.

The whisky glass was empty, so I had another. An hour went by and Willoughby knocked gently on the study door.

'Come in. Have a drink. I think we need to talk.'

Willoughby entered in his usual and annoying subservient way. He refused a drink but sat opposite me. He looked tense but was willing for me to start the conversation. We'd both had time to formulate our thoughts.

I opened with, 'What did you think of that fellow?'

'He appeared very knowledgeable. At least with regard to our friend The Magician. But in other areas...I'm not so sure.'

'So what he said about you is not true? That what you're saying?'

'Yes. That's what I'm saying. He's wrong about me, as I'm sure he's wrong about the things he was saying about you, Colonel.'

'Hummm.' Was all I was willing to comment.

'He could be extremely dangerous. We should have him followed.' said Willoughby slowly, for emphasis.

'Who'll do that? I've two men left, you none.'

Willoughby was squeezing his hands together. Eventually, he said, 'I have to ask. Did you find a notebook, or diary, on your son?'

I shook my head, 'No. Didn't know he kept one. We dressed him in his best suit before putting him in a decent coffin. The thieving Gypsy farmers took everything. Rings, watches. The lot.'

'So that's probably hot air then. Probably most of it was.'

We held the silence for a while as I sipped the whisky. It tasted weak and strange to me. I was not in the mood.

'So what he said about you, Jamison? Hot air as well?' I looked across at him over the glass. He looked back. I saw a little flicker that could be fear or guilt. I'm used to reading men under stress.

'I've got nothing to hide, Colonel. I'm paying for the sins of my associates. They're the ones that should be under investigation. I now know they're guilty, but in the eyes of the law, I'm guilty in their absence. No.... he's nothing on me. But he may have plenty on other members of The Brethren. I think he's just become....confused between the difference.'

'So you say.' I finished my drink and considered another one.

Willoughby said, 'He implied that you're under investigation too, Charles. What have you done?'

'Nothing, absolutely nothing. My honour as Colonel in the British Army should tell you that.'

'Yeah, sure.'

'You doubt me?'

‘I’m not sure who to believe. Him, or you. He certainly thought he’d a lot of information on us both. Where on earth did he get that from?’

There was a moment of silence while I refreshed my glass and sat down again.

‘I think he’s just fishing.’ Willoughby said as if he’d just made up his mind. ‘I don’t think he’s got anything on either of us. He gave no details, did he?’

I shook my head, hoping Willoughby was right. ‘He’s assumed that as men of the world we have our secrets. Does he know what they are....no. I don’t think so.’ Willoughby sounded convinced.

‘I hope you’re right.’ I said, sounding less than convinced.

‘If he had the information he hinted at, he would’ve gone to the police by now, wouldn’t he?’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe, if it was in his interest. But he said his client drives the investigation. He probably has to notify the client about any decision he has to make.’

‘That could take a few days. If the police don’t come knocking within a few days, we could be in the clear.’ Willoughby said with more hope than he probably felt.

‘They’ll be knocking for you, not me.’ I said, equally with more hope than conviction.

‘Perhaps we should get away from here for a few weeks? Don’t you think?’ Willoughby stood.

‘I didn’t think you could go far. Parole and all that guff.’

Willoughby took a deep breath and tried to think. ‘But he knows that we’re both connected to The Magician. And we’re now on his radar. We need to find out more about him. I’ve an idea. May I use your computer?’

I waved for him to go ahead. ‘I’ve just entered the password, so you can go straight in. What’re you looking for?’ I asked as he was tapping away on the keys.

‘Searching for our mysterious Mr Tea Michigan. I’ve got six results. Here we are. A website.’

After a quick read of the page Willoughby said, ‘A few hundred words that’s all. There’s no clue about the man or his activities. It’s so general as to be almost useless. I can’t believe anyone would want to hire him based on this website. No phone numbers? Or even a location!’ Just a single contact of an email address.

Willoughby sat back and steepled his fingers under his chin. 'We need to get this guy to meet with us again and this time we'll follow him. I've an idea.'

He tapped away for a few moments before saying, 'I'm opening a new email account with Yahoo. We need a false name. Any ideas?'

After a moment's thought I said, 'What about John Smith. Ordinary. Doesn't arouse suspicious. Why do you want a name?'

'I'm setting up an email account. From that we can contact this Michigan guy and get him to see us as clients.'

'He'll recognise us, won't he?' I said dismissively.

'Not US. We'll use....Nick, or Tamm as a front. Then we'll follow him.'

'Okay. A name, you say...?'

'Say we use Tamm as the fake contact man. We need an Asian name. Know any?'

I was in thought. My mind went back over the years. The many camps in many countries. The skirmishes, the battle meetings, the people, the residents. 'I knew a Toby Wang, once. Nice boy.'

'That'll do.' Willoughby said and filled in the details.

I stood over him, watching in fascination with what I still thought as black magic. Why do we need computers? I do just enough to get by. But this website lark!

Willoughby seemed pleased with his progress as he sat back and read out his script. 'I need an experienced detective to find a dangerous person who is trying to blackmail me. I hope that'll be enough to pique his interest, but not too obvious to arouse his suspicions. What do you think, Colonel?'

I nodded, and he pressed send.

'Won't he be able to trace that email back to us?' I said, suddenly cautious again.

'No way. It gets lost with the billions of others going through the ether.'

'Now what?' I said sitting down again.

'We wait.' he said with a sense of satisfaction, that we were being proactive instead of just worrying ourselves to a nervous breakdown.

We were quiet for a while before I gave a big sigh and said, 'I suppose I'd better break the news to my family.'

'What news?' he said with a frown.

‘Tell them we’re in a state of siege and that from now on they need bodyguards. I suppose I’d better tell Nicker and Tammo too.’

Willoughby stood and moved over towards me. ‘Are you sure you want to take what he said seriously?’

‘Is the Magician coming to get me? Yes, I’d take that seriously. Even if that Michigan fellow hadn’t come in here, I’d be worried about that. We sent a force to kill the bastard, and he killed them.’

‘He left two alive, don’t forget.’

‘Yes. It’s an old military trick. The Greeks and the Romans used it a lot. It’s a message.’

‘But he let Justin return. He *gave* him to you. What sort of message is that? Everything’s okay?’

‘Everything’s not okay, Jamison. Don’t pretend it is. And while we’re at it...I’m tired of that old suit you’re wearing. Change it.’

‘As you know, I’ve no money.’

‘But you have a wardrobe damn it.’

‘Not anymore. The beloved wife threw everything out as part of the divorce proceedings. She really hates me. She doesn’t believe in my innocence. I actually think she believes I was having an affair with your daughter. Imagine that!’

‘No, I can’t and won’t imagine that.’ I got up for another whisky, determined to put more water this time. ‘I’ll give you a few hundred to buy some clothes. You look a mess. Spoil the look of this place.’ I swept my arm around for emphasis.

As I poured, I hesitated. ‘Something’s missing!’ I said, looking intensely around the study. It took me a few moments before I pointed to an empty spot on the sideboard. ‘A photograph!’

‘Missing?’ Willoughby said puzzled. ‘What photograph?’

A few more reflective moments before I said, ‘A picture of Justin and Naomi. When they were in their early teens. It’s gone!’

‘You think Michigan took it?’

‘He was alone in here for a while. Sure, he took it.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

I told my family that I’d been advised of a security alert. From now on Tamm and Nick will be watching over us all. Nothing to worry about, just a

precaution. I think they bought it. But Samantha, in her usual calm and calculating way, threw a fit and said her life was over.

I refused to go as far as an electronic sweep. To start with, the equipment was far too expensive. I'm not sure if Tamm and Nicker knew how to use it. I thought all that was overkill.

After a few days, we felt more relaxed about Michigan's visit. Willoughby was using my computer when he called to me, 'We've got a reply from Michigan.' he said with more excitement than he normally showed.

'What did he say?' I said, moving towards him.

'Err...here we are. Thank you for your enquiry, Mr Wong. I am away from the office at the moment in London, England. When I get back, I will contact you.'

'That's it?' I said disappointedly.

'It's a start.' Willoughby said and started to write a reply.

He read it out as he typed. 'Thanks for your response. We are based in London. Perhaps we can meet for a preliminary meeting. We will pay for your time.'

He looked at me and I nodded. 'Send it.' I said.

I was much more resigned to the situation now I'd time to think about it all. I was now convinced that Michigan was all hot air. As Willoughby had said, he was just guessing at our situation. We'd had no contact from the police, or parole authorities, during these few days and felt sure we were safe - for the short term, anyway.

'Another reply, Charles.' I hurried over to look at the screen.

I read it out loud, 'That might work for me. I will let you know when I can fit you in. Regards T. Michigan.'

'Again we just have to wait.' Willoughby said.

The house had taken a new dynamic over the last few days. Either Tammo or Nicker was on hand as guards. The other followed either Sara or Samantha when they went out. Deep in my heart, I knew neither were a match for a determined Magician. But at least they might deter him a little.

It was a Saturday and Samantha had gone out with her school friends bowling or some such activity. Can't remember which. Poor ol' Tammo looked really happy to hang around a bunch of noisy teenage girls, with Samantha not wanting him anywhere within sight of her and her friends. An impossible task, for which I said, 'Just do your best.'

Sara was somewhere in the house, doing Sara things. I was in the study doing study things and Willoughby was upstairs doing...God knows what. Still in the disgusting old suit.

Nicker paced the house looking bored and restless.

When the doorbell rang, I'm sure Nicker wanted to answer the door, grab whoever it was by the throat and get some action for the day. But it was Herbert's duty. Slow as he was, he always got the job done. Without the throat-grabbing.

I'd noticed an improvement in Nicker's attitude over the last few days. To start with, I made sure he had no access to alcohol. He wouldn't drink mine without permission, so between Tammo, Herbert and my dedication to keep him sober, I think we succeeded.

There were a few instances when he was...not himself, but I think he has some drugs stashed somewhere. Tammo is working on that too. I was reflecting on this when Herbert shuffled into the study.

'A gentleman to see you, sir.'

'Really. Who is it?'

'I do not know, sir. But he said to tell you that you would like to receive him. He said you'd know him as, The Magician.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

JAGGER

I breathed a deep sigh of relief as I walked away from the house.

I half expected a shout for me to stop. Or even a shadowy figure to start following me. But I walked down the long driveway and turned left down the country lane. I was relieved to see the dark grey mini still there and heard the engine turn over as I approached. Without looking back, I got in the car and it took off down the road.

‘How’d it go?’ asked Lucie anxiously.

‘As well as could be expected.’

‘Get everything?’

I had to think, did I get everything I planned on? ‘I think so.’ I said with a grin.

‘You were a long time.’ She said with accusation in her voice.

‘It took as long as it takes.’ I grinned back at her. I could see the look of concern in her eyes. ‘A piece of cake.’ I added.

I pulled off the more uncomfortable parts of my disguise. I took off the glasses and removed the deep-coloured contact lens. I hate wearing anything in my eyes, but I have to do it so often I’ve got used to the discomfort.

They may have thought I’d taken them out in the study, but a sleight of hand just made it seem so. It’s a strange thing, once you see a man with glasses, he looks strange without them. And sometimes vice versa. So both scenarios should help confuse any recollection process.

‘What happened?’ Lucie said, sparing me a quick glance as she hurried down the country roads.

‘Well....the big surprise was...that he was not alone.’

‘Alone how. Hooker? A naked chimpanzee? Another man, what?’

‘Another man.’

‘NO!’

‘Not like that. The man named Willoughby.’

‘Jamison Willoughby? The....Brethren guy?’

‘The same.’

‘What was *he* doing there?’ she said.

Willoughby being there was not a surprise to me. I suspected there was an association between them. I pulled out my cheek pads and could now talk easier.

‘Don’t really know, but both of them want to get hold of The Magician, so I suppose they combined forces. This was fortunate, in that it gave me the opportunity to divide their forces.’

‘Divide and conquer. The oldest trick in the book.’ She said with a wide smile. ‘How d’you do that?’

‘I made them suspicious of each other’s innocence and implied the authorities were looking hard at both of them.’

‘Cat amongst the pigeons. Another classic ruse.’ I looked at her to see if she was mocking me. She was concentrating on the road ahead. But I knew that small smile was when she was pleased with herself. ‘Glad you’re out safely, hon.’ She looked, and me and smiled.

We sat in silence for a while as I ran through everything in my mind.

I think I did enough to impress on them that I’d extensive knowledge on both of them and The Mythical Magician. They would be both wary of Michigan and see him as useful to them. I felt I needed to inject a short, sharp shock to their systems. So after the fake phone call, I dropped the bombshell about Justin. They’d be worrying about how much I knew of their activities on that one.

The mobile call was easy. Before going in I set up an MP3 track of a ringtone and set it to play and hit the pause button. When I was ready, I hit the play button, and the tone sounded. It sounds just like a call. It gave me the opportunity I wanted to be alone in the study. I couldn’t take too long, but I needed access to the computer.

The ruse about Samantha whereabouts got the password working, which saved me a lot of time trying to crack it. I’d made a big point of standing back, appearing to want no access to his machine.

From their diary, I’d know where his daughter was supposed to be for about a week in advance. That was a critical part of my plans.

I covered my actions by muttering loudly while I put in a memory stick and downloaded all of RH’s files. I also took photographs of his study as I may need an excuse to return and it formed part of a later plan as well.

We hit a larger main road and Lucie relaxed a little. I know she doesn’t like driving much. Having lived in London almost all her life, she’d little need to own a car. I was going to suggest I took over, but I knew she might misinterpret this, so kept quiet.

‘Anything else to tell me? Now I’m your partner in crime.’

‘You’re not a partner. And it’s not a crime.’

‘Then why are you disguised then?’ she was smiling.

‘It’s a ruse. Ruses are not illegal. I think.’ I was smiling now.

‘So...Mr Legal...did you plant a bug in there? Oh...I forgot you don’t do illegal things...’ She laughed out loud.

‘No. As it happens, I didn’t plant a bug in there. In fact, I even suggested they make an electronic sweep. I felt it fitted into my character and I didn’t want them to find something so soon after my visit. They might sweep for a day or two and soon get bored with it.’

‘Good. I’m proud of you. AND you didn’t kill anyone. A bonus.’ She laughed out loud again. ‘So no problems then?’

I was silent for a moment and she glanced at me. ‘What? What happened?’

‘Nothing happened. A slight...glitch. They’ve a sketch of The Magician.’ I felt the car slow slightly, and she was looking at me.

‘Road!’ I said as softly as I could.

‘They have a picture of you!’

‘No. A Sketch. An artist’s sketch.’

‘Did it look like you?’

‘Me, personally, no. But they had another that came pretty close.’

‘And what’re they going to do with this?’

I shrugged. ‘They were thinking of....broadcasting it on TV.’

‘What!’ The car slowed even more.

‘Can we pull in over there? If you want details, you have to be sitting in this seat.’

We changed seats after a short stop and I could tell her mind was turning over.

She was a reluctant choice of mine as a support system. I had to have an exit strategy and today she was it. She’s far from incompetent, but a little...unsure of exactly what’s happening and why. This is not her line of business, but it is mine. Or was until I retired. I’d *thought* I’d retired, anyway.

‘I made a good case for them not to use the sketches. Whether it works...’ I shrugged, ‘...I don’t know. We’ll see.’ I waited while she thought about it and mentally held my breath until she reached her logical conclusion.

A thought was wriggling around in the back of my mind. I worried at it as I drove, and it finally surfaced. Willoughby’s suit. No. Not the suit - the

buttons. *A button.* It was out of context. A breast pocket with a false button? Fashion faux pas?

No. I recognised that button. I'd used something similar myself on occasion. It was a microphone button. Attached to it would be a recording device. Jamison Willoughby recorded conversations.

As the recording device was a part of the suit, it made me think how much more he'd recorded and going back how far? He had to store this information somewhere. Somewhere in a digital format. But where? I'd like to get a listen to some of that. This was dynamite stuff. I needed to think about this later.

We were on the motorway before she said very quietly and sadly, 'So we remain isolated and in hiding, do we?'

The penny had dropped. 'For a while. A short while, till I sort things out.'

My next reincarnation of Tea Michigan I did on my own. I never told Lucie where I was going. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision.

I'd met Orlando Stone before. He never struck me as a man who'd give away his asset's information. I wanted to know what happened and why. I'd worked for the man a few times and liked him. I needed to know he was alright. More importantly, he was still alive after Willoughby and Ryce-Hardin had finished with him.

Breaking into Stone's home was easy. When you've done it as many times as I have, it is. I'd waited until the house was empty and went in. I took my time to have a good look around. Tried to memorise everything I could. Took photos with my phone where there was a mass of detail. You never know when you might need that info. I took my time, but he still hadn't come home. I had the time to study his model ship, find the plans and read all about it. Common interests can make a quick common bond. Useful info to get your opposition on your side.

He seemed to be a family man, judging by the photographs and memorabilia around his home and office. Doing very well judging by the home and general trappings of his house. You can tell a lot about a family by the kitchen. Normally a woman's domain, so if it has a high spec and had lots of money spent on it, it shows the woman has a big say in the family lifestyle.

I came away from Orlando feeling very sad for him. The visit by Baker had been clearly traumatic, and he needed justice. I wanted to factor that into my future plans. I now had a lot of thinking and research to do. I was unsure of my deadlines, so needed to get on with it. Making my excuses to Lucie I set about planning a very large and complex campaign.

The only time-driven series of events were those of Samantha. She was the target in my sights and I had to be incredibly careful how I went about it. Over the next few days, thanks to her Facebook, I knew where she was supposed to be and followed her, discretely. I took many photos and eventually had all I need. I'd managed to avoid her bodyguards. One day Tamm, the next Baker.

During a quieter time, I used Photoshop to recreate little scenarios with the photos I had of Samantha. I felt extremely creative when I did this. The art of illusion is a constant fascination to me.

I'd found one window of opportunity when it was possible for me to put my plan into action. It relied on Samantha doing what her diary said she was going to do. I did a quick check on Facebook and found that the situation hadn't changed. I knew where she would be at a certain time and that she'd be absorbed in the activity. Her guard needed to be vigilant too, so this was the single nucleus that set my target date and time.

Another spur of my investigations was finding damning evidence against Willoughby. This was difficult. Beyond difficult – impossible. The man was a genius at not being connected with anything. Using other people as a conduit for his misdemeanours. All the Brethren evidence was in the hands of the police, but there are always ways around that. What little investigating I achieved soon proved they'd nothing to convict him on.

I was going to have to get creative with Jamison Willoughby.

Charles Ryce-Hardin was a different proposition altogether. I extracted a great deal of info from his computer. I also got financial records from the dead Baker Boys and noticed specific payments at certain times over the last ten years. I got access into RH's financial accounts and found large payments made at around the same time. I also had a wealth of material from his hard drive of a more personal nature. I would need more time to trawl through that.

For most people access to these areas is impossible. The general conception is that even hardened criminal hackers can't manage it. But over the years I've built up a network of people who owe me. Little favours, sometimes innocent, sometimes not. I've cultivated a whole range of expertise that helps me in other areas of my business activities. You only need a few people with key information to access huge databases. The key is always to know WHERE you need to look.

Digging into military records I found missions just prior to those active dates of RH. Several times these missions were questioned, local newspapers and rumour factories point to misdemeanours. Put them all together and you have a good case for fraud and robbery against Colonel Ryce-Hardin and the direct command under him.

But the military is adept at covering their own sores with opaque bandages. Hence the *very* early retirement of Colonel Ryce-Harding and his personal force of militia, The Fabulous Baker Boys.

I'd completed as much research as I could. I'd a day left to finalise some equipment and run through everything to spot weaknesses and problems.

I spent a few hours on the treadmill and then went into my hidden closet and looked at my now limited range of handguns. I chose one and sat and thought through what to do with it.

My last task, and probably the hardest, was to tell Lucie my plans.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LUCIE

Sometimes Jagger would just disappear for a day at a time.

He says he'll be back late. He doesn't say anything, but I think it's to make a tour of his safe houses. Collect mail. Check everything is still alright in case of an emergency. He says he's retired but is he, really?

I often feel lonely stuck out here in the country. I'm a city girl. Noise, bustle, aggravation, pent-up nervous energy type of places. When he's not here, I have to stay indoors. I get very lonely.

He's paranoid about it. Ridiculous. I told him so, and he keeps reminding me that he said it would be this way and I agreed. It's so annoying when he's right and I can't find an argument against it!

Jagger has been on the treadmill for hours now. He has a problem, and he's working it out. It's a big problem, judging by the time he's been in the home gym. At some time I might get a hint about what's on his mind. But I wouldn't hold my breath on that.

It was around lunchtime when we sat down over a coffee and I held his hand. It felt a little calloused after the more physical work of recent weeks. I don't think mine felt much better, either. I looked like a farmer's wife already. Hair in a bun, old working clothes and dirty nails. And this was mid-morning!

He knew I'd something to say when I did that. I could see the resignation in his eyes. We both knew that this was going to be old news. We'll talk around in circles for a while and promise each other there would be a better way.

'What's going on, Jag?' I said quietly. Now for the evasion and perhaps some white lies.

He shrugged and drained his coffee mug.

I kept my face solemn as I said, 'I wish we could have friends. Go shopping. Have parties, go to the theatre. Be normal?'

'We're both paying for my sins of an earlier life, Luce. The only way we can consider a normal life and live as Mr and Mrs Gilchrist is if we can be absolutely sure that the monster is dead. But this monster is growing and won't die. I cut off a head, and another two grows. It has to be killed from the ground up.'

'Does this mean the whole Ryce-Hardin family? Women and children?'

'It's tempting. But, no. I can't do that. But if I don't....I'm just going to have to try to cut off enough of the main heads to let the monster wither and

die. That's going to have to be enough. Our future happiness and safety depend on it.'

'That's it? No other way?'

'That has to be our strategy?'

'Our survival strategy?'

'Exactly that.' I nodded and held my cooling mug, no longer interested in the coffee. 'But I'd have to be sure that's been done before we can relax.'

'How'll you know when the monster is really dead, Jag?'

'There are three heads. Willoughby, Ryce-Hardin and....The Magician.'

'You!'

'Not me, the Magician. Without the Magician, there's no problem. But he has to permanently disappear for that to happen. So I have to take the Magician out of the equation. I thought retirement would do that but look where we are now.'

Where are we now? I thought.

'In the first instance, the authorities want the asset known as the Magician. As long as they can't link Jagger Gilchrist to the assassin, we're safe. Over the years I've been extra careful no connection can exist. As of now that still remains the case. We need everyone to stop looking for the Magician. The authorities have all but done that.'

'Are you confident in that?' I asked, suddenly doubtful.

'Enough to bet our lives on it, yes.'

'Okay.' I said, trying to smile.

'Two. Ryce-Hardin. He's quite a complex problem. There're several things that need to happen to neutralise him for good. Three. Willoughby. He needs to be permanently put away.'

'Killed?'

'No, not killed. You never know what plans he's put in place should he be harmed or killed. He needs to be alive, but useless. Leave no strands from that crafty, slimy head.'

'At the risk of being overly dramatic, which I'm not as you know... don't roll your eyes at me. At the risk....anyway, why don't you just go and...you know....kill them all. It's what you do, isn't it? Did, what you did.'

'No I never did. I don't just kill everybody.'

'Okay.' I said, allowing the silence to descend.

I felt something was coming. For the last few days, he'd been distant, out often. Using many disguises. He was up to something and he was about to tell me what it was. Or not.

'I need to divide and conquer.' He said as if thinking out loud.

'Who, exactly?' I said trying to draw him out.

'All three.' He looked at me sharply. A clarity was in his grey eyes and I waited. No point in talking now. He was going to talk, or not. Nothing I could do would change what was going to happen in the next few minutes.

'Ryce-Hardin made a comment he'd stop at nothing to revenge his kids' deaths. So....I will help him. He knows I'll be coming. His security will be beefed up, but his determination to get the Magician will not diminish. This won't be over until both of them are taken out permanently.'

So he was considering killing them. I felt uneasy. I held back from interrupting, letting him continue as if he was thinking out loud.

'When you plan something that involves one other player, you can calculate the options and the variables. When two are involved, those options multiply. When three or more, the options become near to limitless, and it's impossible to calculate all the scenarios coming from one simple action.'

'Sounds right to me.' I ventured.

'Willoughby - I think I can handle him. But Charles Ryce-Hardin's another matter altogether. I need to get him to change his attitude towards me altogether. And that's not going to be easy. And I'm going to need your agreement and help with what I'm planning.'

Now I was frightened. If he needed me it meant he couldn't handle it on his own. Sure, I'd helped him out on a few jobs before. Getaway driver, taxi cab. Brilliant seducer. All I'm capable of. But the look on his face and the solemnity of his words made me think this was far beyond that. Far beyond my capabilities perhaps.

'For once, I'm not sure I can pull this off.' He said quietly into his cold mug.

'You've an exit strategy though, don't you?' I said now getting very concerned.

'Yes. Of course. The problem is....it has to be you.'

'Okay.' I said trying to smile. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Be my back up. That's all. If something goes...wrong. Call for help. That's all.'

'That doesn't seem too hard. I can do that.'

‘It’s vital you understand something. No matter what you hear, what you *think* is happening, or is *about* to happen. I want you to act ONLY on my code word. Not a moment before. Please say you can do that?’

‘I’ll try.’

‘Without trying to be dramatic...*try* isn’t good enough. My life is on the line here. You have to promise me ONLY when I say the keyword.’

‘Okay, I WILL do it. What’s the word?’

‘Luca Lacusta.’

‘That’s two words. Sorry...I know what you mean. Yes. I can do that....will do that.’

‘Good. Remember...only if you hear ME say *Luca Lacusta* do you act. I’ll leave written instructions on what you have to do. NOTHING else. Nocoming in to get me. That’s not part of the plan. It’ll only screw things up for me. Understood?’

‘Sure. You can always shoot your way out.’

‘I won’t be able to have a weapon.’

‘What! You’re taking too much of a risk going up against them unarmed!’

‘Not really. Ryce-Hardin wants me badly. He wants to spit in my face while he tells me how slowly and painfully I’m going to die. He needs me alive for that. I need to get close to him. This is the only way.’

‘We could kidnap them all?’

‘Less impactful. This is more ...theatre. An illusion.’

This sounds more like the old Magician, I thought. But what was he going to do?

‘One more *vital* thing.’ The new Magician said.

‘Here we go.’ I whispered with my “now what” face on.

‘I need you to call my mobile on another given signal. That’s easy, right? Wait for the signal and call me. Don’t hang up, just send the images I’ve prepared. I’ll write it all down.’

I smiled at him. ‘Of course. What’s the keyword this time?’

‘A phrase. *Think of Samantha.*’

‘Think of Samantha.’ I repeated several times. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you call me right away and send photos to my mobile. Can do?’

‘Will do.’ I said smiling. ‘How dangerous is this going to be, Jag?’ My smile had left me.

‘I’m as prepared as I can be for the situation. I’ve covered everything. After the first few minutes...very little danger. After your phone call...no danger at all.’

‘And Luca Lacusta?’

‘Only if something goes really wrong. I don’t intend for that to happen. I’ve done similar things before, you know. I’m still here.’

‘Let’s you and I keep it that way, right?’

I kissed him hard on his lips, tasting coffee.

‘I need you to be behind me on this, Luce. FULLY behind me.’ He said looking deep into my eyes. ‘You’re not the rescue mission. You’re the vital support team.’

‘I always am, Jagger. Always right there.’

He kissed me deeply, and I felt the old passions stirring again. We both knew this was not the time, but the kiss lingered.

I pulled away and said, ‘It’s going to be like hanging on to the tail of the Tiger.’

He smiled and said, ‘But who’s the Tiger and who’s doing the hanging on?’

PART FOUR – Tail of the Tiger

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

CHARLES RYCE-HARDIN

I couldn't believe my ears.

'Herbert? Show the visitor in here and get Mr Baker down here as quick as you can, man. Tell him who the visitor is.'

'Yes, sir. Right away.'

Herbert shuffled off a little faster than normal. I tried to compose myself.

The "real" Magician? What was this, a hoax? I must be prepared for anything.

I settled into my chair at the desk and adjusted my tie. In the top drawer, I had my old service revolver. I took it out and checked to see if it was loaded. I left the drawer open and the gun within easy reach.

The Magician. Here! All my prayers answered?

But WHY?

I saw a movement at the door and Herbert ushered in the stranger.

I remained silent as I stared at the man before me. I looked at every detail, trying to imagine what my children saw in the last few moments of their life. He was not very tall. Average I would say. Medium coloured and length of hair. Dark green eyes. I guessed his age at around forty-five. He was wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt, with a baggy black bomber jacket. The stranger looked trim and fit. He stood looking at me with his hands thrust deep into the jacket pockets.

'I understand you're looking for me, Mr Ryce-Hardin?' I couldn't find a trace of an accent. I nodded. Unable to speak. 'Well...I'm here. I want to have a word with you too.'

He suddenly plunged towards me and landed almost flat on his face. He was just able to get his hands out of his pockets and absorb some of the impacts on the carpet. Nick Baker stood behind him with a black 1911 automatic and had just hit him hard at the base of his neck.

I saw The Magician try to rise with some disorientation. But Nick was in the room and kicking him hard. To the head and ribs. The man rolled into a ball to protect himself.

'Stop! Stop! STOP NICK!' I said standing.

Nick had wild eyes and was panting. It took a lot of control to stop him venting his anger on the man who'd killed his comrades. MY comrades too. As much as I wanted the man kicked to death, I wanted to talk to him first.

'You can finish the job in a minute.' I said as evenly as I could.

There was silence in the room. I heard Nick panting and the man on the floor groaning a little. He tried to sit up and I saw blood on his face and bruises already forming. He was holding his ribs.

'Some welcome for a messenger with information about your son and daughter.' He said spitting out blood onto my Persian carpet.

I felt a chill of fear. "Messenger"? Was he not The Magician? He said he was The Magician!

'Are you really The Magician?' I had to ask.

He took his time answering, knowing everything was on hold until we knew the truth. He staggered to his knees and then shakily to his feet. Nick moved in, the automatic held close to his waist and pointed at his victim. His hands were not shaking today.

The visitor leant against the wall and Nick moved in quickly and frisked him. Within a moment there was a phone and a gun on my desk. The gun was new and shiny and looked unused. Nick held the 1911 on his man, never taking his eyes off him for a moment. He'd experienced this fellow before and knew how tricky he could be.

I was waiting for an answer.

When he'd regained his breath, the fellow let out a long sigh and sucked in a deep breath before saying, 'Your wife needs to hear this too, Mr Ryce-Hardin.'

'Leave my wife out of this. She's nothing to do with this.' I said raising my voice.

'She has EVERYTHING to do with this! You'll get nothing out of me unless your wife is present. This is about HER children too.'

My mind was whirring. I didn't want Sara to see this. I didn't want her to see the darker side of what a military man on a mission could be like, what we can do to another man. I didn't want her further upset about Justin and Naomi.

'Say your peace and get out?' I thought a bluff might work.

He just shook his head and slid to the floor with his back against the wall. Nick moved forward with his gun raised to strike. The fellow never flinched. He was prepared for pain. Prepared for vented anger. He was prepared to wait.

I looked up to see Herbert standing in the doorway. His face was neutral, as usual, but he'd no fear of what was happening.

'Get Mrs Sara, Herbert, will you? Tell her to come prepared for a shock.'

Herbert took a long last look at the visitor and shuffled off.

'Sir?' Nicker said looking at me, his eyes still wide with emotion.

'Are you The Magician, or not!' I was getting angry and frustrated now. I was not far off letting Baker loose on the fellow.

The man was still sucking in air and massaging his ribs. He looked steadily at the carpet.

'Get stripped, whoever you are. Leave your underpants on. I don't want Sara too shocked. Make sure there's nothing else on him, Nicker.'

The man slowly stood again and began to remove his clothes, watched carefully by Baker. The T-shirt seemed painful to remove and we could now see bruises forming around the ribs. Nicker's army boots took no prisoners.

The Magician eased off his trainers and struggled to remove the slim fit jeans. He stood with his arms over his head, wearing only underpants and socks. He slowly turned around for Nicker to check he'd nothing left to hide. Short of rummaging through the man's underwear, Nicker made sure nothing was concealed. There was nowhere obvious to conceal anything that might threaten.

Now without clothes on I could see his full body. I was right, he was very fit looking. Very defined abs and biceps. His legs looked strong too. More like....a gymnast than....I couldn't think of a comparison. Was this really the man that killed my children?

While he was doing all that, I picked up the gun. It was a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver. A beautiful weapon. It was nickel plated so looked like it was made out of pure silver. It had pearl handles with a small round disc motive. As I looked closely, and the elegantly dimpled disc, I saw an "M" embossed discretely in it. This was The Magician's gun!

I picked up the mobile phone and was disappointed it was just a cheap one. I pressed the button for contacts and was surprised to find the menu empty. We'd get no information out of that.

The Magician now slid back down to the floor and was wiping the blood off his face with the back of his hand. He did not look at any of us and seemed relaxed and patient. He was waiting for Sara. Why?

Nicker suddenly hissed at me, 'I'm not leaving this fucker walk out of here alive, Colonel. Don't make me do that.'

I waved a calming hand at him as I said, 'You will do what I tell you, soldier. Let's just wait and see. Keep calm. Your time will come. I promise you that.'

This seemed to calm him a little.

The injured man had a slight smile on his lips as he said, 'Don't deprive me of the power to speak and think...Soldier. Your heroic Colonel there will have your head if you did that. He wants to hear me beg for mercy - and I want to tell him a few home truths about his family.'

This seemed to excite Nick even more as he said, 'I want both hands, both feet and his dick in retribution for Chocolate, Thorny, Boris, Muddy and Mighty.' He gave a long pause before adding, 'Sir.'

'And what does that leave for Justin and Naomi?' I asked quietly.

He thought a moment before saying, 'His eyes.'

'Charles? Who's this?'

Sara stood in the doorway with Herbert hovering behind her.

I looked at the man sitting on the floor and said, 'She's here now. You have something to tell her?'

The man struggled to his feet and nodded to Sara. Calmly and clearly he said, 'I'm the person who shot your son and daughter, ma'am.'

I was aware for the first time that the man now had a slight accent, which I couldn't place for a moment. Somewhere up North. Not Geordie, something softer.

Sara's face clouded, and her lips set into a hard line. She walked over to the man and hit him as hard as she could with the flat of her hand. It must have hurt her more than it had hurt him.

'You bastard!' was almost whispered. She stared at him silently until something inside her made her turn away and start crying.

I felt I had to break this cycle of anger, frustration and tears. 'So you admit you killed my children?'

'No. I said I shot them. I didn't kill them.'

'It's the same thing!' said Sara dabbing at her eyes.

The Magician pushed himself off the wall and Nick immediately stepped one pace backwards, gun still pointing at the man's head.

'Not the same thing at all, ma'am. If anyone has killed your children it's this man, their father.' He pointed at me. 'Helped by this man, Nick Baker.' He pointed an accusing finger at Nick. 'They helped put them in the gun sights. All I did, was pull the trigger.'

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ was all I could say. I looked at Sara who was looking at me. I noticed a movement by the door and Willoughby took one step inside.

The Magician continued with, ‘By encouraging them into the military mercenary ethic, they became obsessed with hunting and killing people.’

‘You didn’t HAVE to kill them.’ said Sara angrily.

‘Okay. I’ll show you something. Colonel...pick up that gun and point it at Mrs Ryce-Hardin. It’s not loaded but check it first.’ I did what he said, reluctantly, but interested in his point. ‘Now, Mrs Ryce-Hardin – if you knew someone was going to shoot you, would you kill him if you could?’

‘I suppose so. But...’

‘Now...imagine that’s your son. Could you still do it?’

‘Well...no. But my son wouldn’t be pointing...’

‘Your daughter, then. Pointing a gun at you and willing to shoot.’

‘No!’

‘But your daughter did that to ME! A total stranger to me and she pointed her gun at my head and laughed as she said she was going to kill me.’

‘This is ridiculous...’ I said hotly.

Sara’s face was coloured with anger now. She moved closer to the man and said, ‘Did you kill my son?’

He looked at her and with a calm voice said, ‘I pulled the trigger. But as I said, I didn’t kill your son. Between the Colonel here and his dubious henchman Baker over there, they turned your two kids into inhuman killing animals. And it was Willoughby over there...’ again the dramatic pointing finger, ‘... that paid them to come after me. So THEY killed your son. And your daughter.’

Willoughby puffed out his chest and exploded, ‘How dare you. You’ve no proof, whatsoever!’

The Magician said calmly looking at me. ‘So in my book, this is bad parenting, when you try to blame someone else for your own mistakes.’

‘You still pulled the trigger.’ I said, ‘And for that, you must be punished.’

‘I did the humanitarian thing with your son. Despite what you, as parents, might think.’

I could see Nicker was ready to lash out. He’d heard enough of this dialogue trying to justify why the Magician killed people. ‘I’m not waiting. Colonel, I’ll take him to the garage.’

‘Stop!’ Sara said, tears again forming in her eyes. ‘For Christ’s sake stop. Enough. Enough violence in this family.’

I noticed the Magician had glanced at the office clock. The second time in the last few minutes.

Willoughby stepped forward and asked, ‘Did Justin have a notebook on him?’

The Magician shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. I never touched the body, the farmers did the burying. I remember a pile of his belongings on their table. There were some rings, money and a watch. That was all that was any value to them. Nothing else. Given the torment he caused them, he could’ve had a fortune on him and it wouldn’t have made them feel better. A few trinkets were a pathetic compensation. I’m sure you’ll agree.’

Willoughby now looked calmer and more relaxed as he said, ‘So after all this hot air, you’ve no reason to accuse me of hiring the Ryce-Hardin twins. None.’

The Magician smiled at him as he said, ‘What’s this with the notebook then? Your name in it, is it?’

Willoughby controlled his anger. ‘There’s no notebook and nothing to connect me.’

It seemed to me that Jamison looked a little visibly relieved at the turn of events. I still had my doubts about that man.

The Magician turned to Sara and said, ‘How much do you know about your husband’s military activities, ma’am?’

‘What?’ Sara said, still wiping her eyes.

‘Leave her out of it.’ I said quickly.

‘She really should know, Colonel. All these years thinking you’re an upright military hero. Are you that afraid of the truth?’

‘You know nothing about me!’ I said as menacingly as I could.

The stranger seemed to find energy from somewhere as his back stiffened and his legs straightened, taking his weight. His arms hung relaxed at his side and he looked at Sara without blinking. Sara could not stop looking at his eyes.

‘2002. December 22nd. Balad. A small force of men sent on a recon mission. Ten hundred hours. Commanding officer, Colonel Ryce-Hardin. Report filed no enemy sighted. Local report. A local Iraqi bank was robbed by seven armed men. They were dressed in local Arab clothing but appeared to have military weapons. Any of this bringing back memories?’ He turned to Nick who glanced quickly at me.

‘Guilty as charged, sir. That’s what that looks says, Corporal Baker.’ There was a ghost of a smile on the Magician’s face now. I was beginning to think this man knew more than just enough to bluff. I was beginning to be convinced he was who he claimed to be.

He continued with, ‘£200,000 in the Colonel’s bank account. £10,000 in each of the troupes that formed the Baker Boys. Libya, 2003. May 20th. Another recon expedition that revealed nothing. Another bank lost money to armed Arabs. ‘£190,000 in the Colonel’s account. ‘£10,000 in the others.’

I could see Nick getting riled again. I had to say something. ‘Preposterous. Ridiculous. You’re....making this up!’

‘Afghanistan. September 30th. 2010. Day Mirad. Small village. The local resistance movement was moving a lot of weapons to another besieged village. Guess what? Armed Arabs – again! What a coincidence. Must have taken a time to sell those somewhere because payment didn’t reach the Colonel’s bank until six weeks later. £240,000. Still only £10,000 per Baker Boys. Were you cheating your own men Colonel?’

‘Take him to the garage, Nicker.’ I said with as much venom as I felt.

‘Before you do.... I want to tell you something.’ The fellow held out both hands and waited for a second. ‘In a few minutes, my mobile is going to ring. If I don’t speak on it....your daughter will meet with an accident. The first two children you lost, through bad parenting, pushing them down a line where no child should expect to go....your surviving daughter....and my finger is pointing directly at you Colonel, this time her fate is in your hands. No one else you can blame this time. Just you.’

‘You’re bluffing.’ I said. Although a shot of fear passed through me.

‘If it doesn’t ring, then I may be. We just have to wait.’ He still seemed relaxed and confident. What had he done?

‘He’s bluffing, Sara. Of course, he is.’ I said as I saw Sara’s hand go to her mouth in fear.

‘My daughter? What have you done with my daughter?’ she said, tears forming again.

‘This man is a trickster. He’s pulling a fast one again.’ said Nicker.

Another glance at the clock from The Magician.

I thought I’d deflect attention away from this man’s blatant attempt to discredit me before my wife’s eyes. ‘Time we saw what this man really looks like. Nick, take away his disguise. Reveal him to us all. Get ready to take a photo someone. We’re going to finally meet the real Magician.’

‘Think of Samantha.’ The fellow said. ‘Think of Samantha.’ he said slightly louder in case I didn’t hear.

Nick had ripped off the wig he wore to reveal a bald head. With one hand still holding the gun he was about to try to rip out any cheek padding, or any contact lenses the man was wearing.

The phone rang, and all went silent. The tones persisted, now loud in the silence.

‘I need to answer that.’ The Magician said quietly. ‘And soon.’

I was suddenly fearful. This man had a reputation. He was proving his reputation right in front of us. I picked up the phone and passed it to him. What else could I do?

He nodded his thanks and thumbed a switch. ‘Send.’ Was all he said. He waited. We waited.

Nicker looked at me as to what to do. I put my palm out flat to say stay calm, do nothing. Let’s see if he was bluffing here. At the same time, I was getting terrified he might have done something to Samantha.

There was a beep, and he thumbed more buttons. He held the phone out to Sara. She took it with shaking hands and burst into a fresh set of tears and handed the phone quickly to me. The small screen showed a photograph of Sam. She had a look of fear on her face and her eyes were wide. She was in a dirty and dingy room. A sob caught in my throat. I saw Nicker looking concerned at me and passed the phone to him.

I saw his anger rise rapidly. He desperately wanted to kill the man in front of him, but now couldn’t. ‘What’ve you done to her? Where is she?’ The gun was pushed hard into the Magician’s temple. The anger on Nick’s face left no doubt of his intentions.

‘Check everywhere she can be, before believing him.’ Willoughby said.

‘If you try to call either Tamm or your daughter, there *will* be consequences. If either of their phones rings, I’ve left instructions to take the next step with your daughter.’

‘What next step?’ I asked.

‘You do not want to find out.’

‘Where’s my daughter?’ Sara shouted.

‘Safe.’ He said, ‘Now I have your undivided attention.’ He looked at Nicker, ‘And no one’s going to do anything stupid.’

Nicker still looked angry. He looked at me and I shook my head ever so slightly.

‘I came here voluntarily for one purpose. For you to know the real truth. Why else would I be here?’

We were all silent. He had a point, let him make it.

‘Willoughby just wants his power base back and the Ryce-Hardins are his ticket. He’s told you all a pack of lies. Things you wanted to hear.’

‘You’re bluffing. You’ve nothing on me. I’ve done nothing but tell the truth to these people. Why are you lying?’ Willoughby was becoming incensed. ‘You don’t have their daughter. You wouldn’t dare....’ He added.

The Magician started again patiently, ‘I’m sorry about what I had to do to your daughter. But I had to get your attention. I had to make sure you didn’t take your revenge out on me before I said what I came here to say. Which is the real truth? What you do with that.....’ he shrugged.

Sara looked at me and I had nothing to offer her.

‘Now I have your attention I want you to listen to something.’ The Magician slowly reached down to a sock and pulled out one of those funny little black objects you get in mobile phones and the like.

‘Who knows how to play the audio track on here?’ The Magician said.

He held it until Willoughby put his hand up. Jamison took the black thing and moved to my computer. ‘Can you log in for us Colonel?’

I hurried around and tried to keep an eye on the Magician. Was this another of his tricks? I tapped in my password and stepped back. Willoughby took just a few keystrokes, and we heard the recording. He turned the sound up.

‘Play it from the beginning again.’ The Magician said. ‘I want you to hear all of it. I’m afraid that playback started a few seconds into the conversation. But the rest almost speaks for itself.’

The recording started. ‘Can I turn around?’ That sounded similar to the Magician’s voice. But a slightly different accent.

‘Slowly but put the pieces down first.’ That was Naomi. I looked at Sara and her hand was at her mouth again. She recognised her voice too.

‘Nice rack.’ I didn’t know what that meant, coming from Naomi.

‘Weapons are pieces of art. They need to be looked after, cared for. Loved.’

‘They’re tools. Nothing more. Use ‘em. Discard ‘em.’ Was this my daughter? She never had that attitude.....

‘You were at the school.’ The Magician was saying with amazing calm under the circumstances. ‘Watching the Italians. I remember you.’

‘Good memory Magician. Very good. You saw me then?’

‘Biker outfit.’

‘So you’re the legendary Magician?’

‘I suppose I am. Though I’m flattered to hear you say “legendary.”’

‘Don’t flatter yourself. You’re about to be taken out by a girl.’ I heard Sara’s intake of breath.

There was a rustling of something. ‘Put everything in there. Everything. Pants and all.’

There was a long pause as it sounded like he was getting undressed.

‘In the bag.’ Naomi’s voice was devoid of emotion.

‘Tie the top and throw it to my left. About here.’

Some sounds. Something crashed and broke somewhere.

‘Nice bod. Work out?’ I could tell by her voice she was smiling. I could tell by Sara’s face she was not fully understanding what was happening.

‘Tell an old professional. How did you track me? I thought I was good, but you.....!’

Naomi again, sounding smug. I recognise that attitude. ‘Technology, old man. You’ve seen the Iraq war troupes targeting a building with a laser, “Painting” they call it. Just send a laser-guided missile out, it locks onto the paint and wham. Your target can be followed by satellite. Doesn’t need eyes on the ground.’

‘Anywhere?’

‘Mostly. Not always inside buildings. But once you’re out in the open air, or even through the roof of a vehicle, we had you to the nearest metre. Just waiting for the right opportunity to strike. Which is now.’

‘I thought that sort of technology was just for the military?’

‘If you’ve enough money or connections, getting military hardware isn’t difficult. The new Sniper rifles have a similar principle, except the gun sights, find the target, the computer does the calculation, and the bullet is fired more accurately than any human. I have two.’

‘So you ‘painted’ me...when?’

‘After you took out the Italians. Congratulations, by the way. We didn’t figure that one. They were our future employers, and you killed them off. Never mind. One door shuts..... Anyway, as you were walking away I just zapped your head with the laser and the rest is history. Much like your career.’

A slight pause before the Magician said, “Painting!” As simple as that. Well, who would’ve thought....’

‘Digital information is the future, old man. We’ve managed to get more information about you, our target, using technology, than you ever could without it.’

‘Well... I wouldn’t say....’

‘We don’t need time-consuming disguises, wasted time infiltrating targets and clients. It doesn’t fool anyone. It isn’t gas propelled bullets any more. Calculated velocities, estimated wind direction. Allow for Earth rotation, fall of a bullet. Gramme weight of powder. Polishing the bullet for speed and accuracy. Technology has taken over.’

I couldn’t believe this was MY daughter talking!

‘We’ve got a laser gun that can shoot over a thousand yards. You can’t even see or hear it until it puts a hole straight through you. No one knowing where it came from.’

The Magician replied instantly, ‘Real, old-fashioned bullets are like emails. They send a message. Marble ones, a stronger message. You’ll need to adopt some subtlety in your approach, young lady. At the moment you’re a bull at a gate. A child with a new toy. You’ve a lot to learn.’

‘You’re an old man in this game. Time’s passed you by. Time to make way for the new revolution. The business has changed, Magic Man. Your last trick is going to be disappearing forever.’

‘You going to use that?’

‘It’s as good as anything.’

‘A bit loud, isn’t it? For an urban area?’ I think they were talking about Naomi’s gun.

‘I’ll be soon gone.’

‘Maybe. But nothing of the originality of the high tech, you’re banging on about.’

‘It’ll do the job. You won’t be complaining.’

‘Before you do....a question.’

‘Go on.’

‘How did you get to the airfield so fast?’

Naomi gave a little laugh. I well remember that laugh. ‘We’d tagged you from the time you left the school. Once you left Luca’s office we knew which direction you were going in. He’d already told us where he was going, just in case you could follow him. He gave you a lot of credit, Mr Magician. So we knew where you were going. So we used our Motorbikes. We even buzzed you on the A3. Call yourself observant?’

I didn’t know they could ride motorbikes. I never taught them that. Bikes are dangerous!

‘After we drove away from the airport, what happened then?’ The Magician fellow was still sounded very calm.

‘Justin tagged the van when you entered the airport.’ She sounded very smug. Sara held her fingers to her mouth. Justin?

‘We traced you to the station and knew you were heading back to the comfort zone of your safe places. I went ahead to London and picked up your signal. Easy peasy. Justin stayed behind and tracked the van. He torched it to avoid any further police complications.’

‘Zoltán, did he have to be killed?’

‘No, of course not. But Justin thought it messy to leave him free. We like to be neat and tidy.’

Sara was reacting each time to the mention of Justin’s name. It was clear to everyone in the room, including Willoughby, that this was Naomi’s voice. The tape seemed genuine.

‘You keep saying “we”. How many are there?’

‘Just me and my twin brother. Sorry, we haven’t been introduced. How rude of me. You should know who kills you, don’t you think? Though I’m sure none of your sanctions ever knew what hit them and by whom. I’m Naomi Ryce-Hardin and you sort of met my brother, Justin, at the airport. He embarrassingly missed you.’

There was now no doubt in my mind. Sara’s face confirmed she felt the same.

‘At least four times, actually. But let’s not spoil this friendship by quibbling.’ The threatened man was still pushing her.

‘He didn’t have the laser weapon. It was too large to carry on the bikes. He wasn’t used to standard rifle and scope. Call that your lucky day.’

‘I will. With Luca gone and the Italians....who’s going to pay you for me?’

There was a short pause. I held my breath. Where was this going? I took a glance at Willoughby. His hands too were over his mouth now.

‘I know you’re keeping me talking to delay the inevitable, but it’s interesting to chat with you. I think you could’ve taught me a lot. But I could’ve taught you a lot more. Anyway, ...what was it? Who’s going to pay....yes. The Italians left a power vacuum. There’s a new team in town, been there a while, but now filling the vacuum left by Primo. It’s a consortium, really, calling themselves The Brethren. Just like pirates of old. Lots of youthful money. High tech desires. Throwing money at mobility, technology and speed of execution.’

‘Apt phrase.’ The Magician said lightly.

‘Although Mario and Primo were not considered big and all-encompassing, they did have a large slice of the pie, which someone has

now taken over. This someone is willing to embrace the new age of persuasion and enforcement. Us. We have our next job booked through The Brethren already, soon as we finish here. I want us to be called “The Heavenly Twins” because I look like an innocent angel and Justin is more The Angel of Death. The Brethren are willing to spend millions of Euros on high tech equipment to make us more efficient, immediate, mobile. The opportunities are now endless.’

Naomi was warming to her subject. I could imagine her beautiful face, preening as she spoke those terrible words.

‘They even provide a jet when we need it. Justin went out to Hungary in that today. He should be almost there now. Nice, eh?’

I became nervous at the mention of Hungary.

‘Jet? Hungary? Why?’

‘Call yourself smart? Finish the job, dumbass.’

‘What job?’

‘We’re hired to eliminate you, the Hungarian girl and her brother. And that’s what we do. We knew you’d shipped them off to Hungary. We were at the airport.’

Sara slowly sat on the chair and put her head in her hands.

‘I don’t understand....’ The Magician was saying some time in the past.

You of all people know, you never leave a sanction unfinished. Bad for reputation, bad for business. With you gone, there’ll be plenty of business for us, twins. But not if the sanction was left unfinished. How professional would that look?’

Another short pause before The Magician said, ‘So with all this technology at your fingertips, how many sanctions have you completed?’

Pause. ‘This is the first.’

‘No wonder I hadn’t heard of you. Yet, you’ve heard of me!’

‘You’re my first hit, but you’re going to be my biggest.’

‘So the two of you are going to go on from here and rule the world?’

‘I’m the *distraction*, Justin’s the *action*. While they’re looking at me, he’s shooting them.’

‘Beauty and the Beast, yes?’ It sounded like he was smiling now.

‘Beast, maybe. You don’t want to see him riled.’

‘Takes his anger out on the victims, does he?’

‘Sometimes. Always a head shot, though. No chance of recovery from that. But, you know that of course.’

‘Great theories. You’ve thought it all through. But you’ve yet to put it into practice.’ The Magician was openly laughing at our daughter now. He spoke quietly, ‘So if you’re asked to do a silent hit, you know, quietly, no noise, look like an accident. Not a thumping big hole in the victim’s head sort of deal. How would your technology handle that?’

‘We wouldn’t take the job. Leave that for the minnows to eat the scraps from our table. With you gone that’s all that’d be left.’

‘It’s funny, no.... embarrassing to be caught by another professional. A....virgin in the field, as it were. I thought I was the best. The only thing that would make it worse would be to be shot by my favourite gun.’

‘Which one is that?’

I had to look at the shiny gun on my desk.

He laughed, ‘Now I can’t tell you that, can I?’

There was a long silence. The Magician in the room said to us. ‘At this point, she spotted the two weapons I was working on my workbench. I can only think she believed one of them was my favourite gun. She made a choice. The wrong choice.’

Naomi was speaking again, ‘Ahh. This one! Losing your touch, old man. Favourite gun, eh? How many have you killed with this?’

Another pause and I could sense the atmosphere change in the room.

I could see Nicker looking at me, 1911 almost hanging by his side, the object of his hatred almost forgotten was still right in front of him. Willoughby had turned his back on everyone else. Herbert was standing at the door with tears in his eyes. Sara was looking at me like I could stop what was coming next.

‘Last words, Magic Man?’ our daughter said.

A short pause before in the calmest voice he said, ‘Don’t forget me, will you? Don’t forget The Magician.’

‘No fucking way. You’re going to make ME the legend.’

The sound of the bang was loud. Sara jumped, and I saw a fresh rush of tears.

It’s rare that parents could hear the last words of their daughter and the sound the gun made that killed her. It’s not something that should ever happen. It’s not natural, and it’s not kind.

After a silence that must have lasted several minutes, the Magician spoke, ‘That was a recording of your daughter trying to kill me, Mrs Ryce-

Hardin. Have no doubts about her intention. You will also notice, I made *no attempt to kill HER*. The gun was faulty. I was just about to repair it that's why it was out. The other gun referred to was also faulty, but not loaded. When I knew she was there, I pressed the recording switch of a piece of equipment I had to hand in the workshop. As is clear from the recording, The Brethren sent Naomi. As there is only one of them left, he must take the blame. Willoughby! The man Mr Ryce-Hardin allowed into your lives.'

Willoughby controlled his voice as he said, 'As I told the Police and they agreed with me....it was a member of the association that did these things. I had NOTHING to do with any of it! There's no proof, and never will be, to show otherwise. My name wasn't mentioned. That was all a fake, anyway. That's why he's called The Magician. He's an illusionist. This is all an illusion. All of it. Trust me on that.'

The Magician turned to Sara and said, 'Was that your daughter's voice?' She nodded. He turned to me and I nodded. There was no doubt in my mind. He could not have faked that.

'You won't get away with this.' Willoughby was adamant. 'Detective Michigan is right on your tail.'

'The Bulldog. Is the old bastard still after me?'

'He'll get you. Especially with our help.'

'You've not understood a thing of what's just happened here, have you, Willoughby? Perhaps the good Colonel can enlighten you once I've gone.'

'You're going nowhere!' Willoughby said with more bark than his bite would allow.

'I've been in this house many times, Colonel. Many times. Come and go as I please. So you, Nick, won't be able to stop me from leaving this place.'

'I don't believe you. We have excellent security here.' Nick said through clenched teeth.

'That alarm system is very basic and outdated, Colonel.' He stopped and looked around suddenly. 'There's something missing here, isn't there? Something...here...wasn't there a ...photograph here. Let me think. Your...children. That's it! A photo of your children. Have you moved it? I can't see it in here.'

I felt a chill run through me that was becoming familiar. This was a remarkable fellow.

'Where's my daughter?' asked Sara so softly I hardly heard her.

'As soon as I leave, she'll be released, ma'am. Safe and sound, have no doubt. I'm a man of my word at all times and in all situations. So....Now we can talk sensibly. I hope you now have the real picture here. I'm *not* the

villain in this piece. I'm going to walk out of here and disappear from your lives. I want nothing to do with any of you, ever again. That's a fact. That's what will happen. As long as....YOU....LEAVE....ME...ALONE!

There was another stunned silence.

'Ask anyone here, especially your friend Nick over there, what I'm capable of. I took out all his men. Without preparation, without equipment and without help. If you think you can keep any of your family and friends safe from me when I'm angry...you really need to think again. So...don't make me angry. Just LEAVE....ME...ALONE! I just want to live out my life peacefully in Spain. Keep that gun. I brought it as a present to you, Colonel. It'll remind you of me. Every day. Particularly to remind you to leave me alone.'

'You haven't seen the last of me.' Nick grunted.

The Magician looked at me as he said, 'He'd better not mean that. Remember, Samantha. I hold you responsible from now on, Colonel.'

'What about my daughter? Are you really going to release her?' I said as confidently as I could.

'I already have. May I have my shirt back, please?'

Nick reluctantly picked up the clothes from by the wall and threw them at the Magician. He started to dress as he said, 'You've heard of my reputation, now you have first-hand experience of it. So I do not speak from any point of ego when I say that I can come back here any time and make your life a misery. Kill all of you, if I'm pissed off enough. All of this with ease and without guilt. This is your lesson for today.'

'This is not over.' Growled Baker.

'So it seems your pit-bull here can't do anything. And your bulldog out there somewhere doesn't stand a chance of catching me.'

He was dressed, and we all stood silently. He pointed to the chess board with a game in progress. 'Who's move is it?'

'White.' I said.

'Mate in five moves.' said the Magician quickly.

He walked through the front door as if he owned the place. Herbert shut it quietly behind him.

Within a few moments of reflection on the chess board, I realised he was right. Beaten by a common hitman.

Beaten at every turn since he walked into the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SARA

My nightmare of the last few weeks suddenly got worse.

How can I cope with this? The loss of my children is one thing. To know they were murdered, quite another. To find out what they were really like is more than heart-breaking.

I still struggle to believe what I'd just witnessed. I'd heard the last words my daughter spoke. Naomi was preening and bragging, she was gloating about killing a man. She'd become a killer and was proud of it. And Justin. She'd mentioned Justin's terrible role in this too.

I kept thinking, what if that recording hadn't existed? I would've gone through life mourning the death of my children believing they were pure victims of a crazed assassin. I'm still not sure whether that would be more acceptable than knowing the truth. I feel right now I couldn't cope with either very well.

How much does Charles know about all this? Was this beaten man right about Charles driving our children into his terrible profession? Everyone wanted to doubt the man. But he'd walked through the door knowing he might not survive. He wanted us to know the truth. ME. He wanted ME to know the truth. Did the other two *already* know the truth?

It was a great relief to all of us to find Samantha hadn't been kidnapped at all. A ruse, Willoughby had suggested. He reminded everyone several times that he'd said this man was not to be trusted and he was a trickster. Willoughby was right this time. But then Willoughby had his part to play too. He denies it strongly. But the Magician said many things today, none of which can be disproved easily. Not even by Willoughby.

I needed time and space to adjust to this new wave of emotions. I couldn't face Charles or Willoughby. I had meals sent up to my room and had only Samantha in my room as company. I'd asked her many times what had happened. She said, 'Nothing'. Four girls went with her to the movies. Tamm sat a few rows back, sleeping through the Chick Flic. It seemed more than a coincidence that The Magician arrived at the front door the same time the movie started.

Both were responsible enough to turn off their mobile phones and we would've never been able to contact them and confirm everything was all right. The Magician had planned everything down to the last detail.

All he came to say was that he was not totally reasonable for our children's deaths and to stop hunting him. I'd be unaware that Charles and Jamison were actively hunting for him. Now they had to stop.

Could I accept he was not to blame anymore? No. Of course not. He pulled the trigger. He still chose to, gun pointed at his head or not. However, and here I get confused. He didn't shoot Naomi. The gun backfired, or something. But he did shoot and kill Justin. In his defence, Justin was about to shoot friends of his. But he still shot and killed my boy. A mother can never overlook that. Or forgive.

Samantha took the teenage option of distrusting all of it. She wasn't there, she didn't see the raw emotion and sincerity that was needed to understand the events of a few months' past. She wasn't there and therefore we old fools were tricked. 'He's called The Magician. That's what he does, fool people, mum!'

I'm not sure if I'm happier she doesn't believe any of it. She held her siblings in high esteem and looked up to them as idols. Role models. Perfect human beings. I know they were never that. But what sort of mother persists in destroying her own high opinion of them?

I look at the photos now and see them in a whole new light. The light is dimmer than before, but a mother's heart never lets memories go without a fight.

The problem remains as before. What do I do now?

I understand from Herbert that Charles is distraught over the news. We both believed our children were the victims. Now it seems we were wrong. How can you not know your own children? How can you not see a change in their personalities that led them down a dark and unforgiving road? How can a parent not feel responsible? The Magician called us bad parents. I have to agree. But the point now is to be a good parent to our remaining child. I must not allow Samantha to be swayed from the honourable and decent life we want for her.

I've stressed this in my talks with her. She understands, and I know she's a sensible girl. At fifteen she's a lot of experience with older people. We are old as parents for a girl so young, her siblings were a lot older. She's grown up old beyond her years. But her friends....they have not. They seem childish and immature compared with Sam. I worry about her association with them. I want to move her away from their influence. Perhaps a finishing school will do the trick? I must talk to Charles about it.

When I can face him again.

Herbert attends to my every whim. I don't know what we'd do without him. But he's getting old, very slow and sometimes forgetful. But always willing. There's no way he would consider retiring, other than in a box.

I sit and reflect on the changes in our lives and feel only more and more depressed. I refuse to take medication and feel my punishment is to have to suffer mental anguish, especially if I'm part of the problem.

Herbert was collecting the tea tray one morning, and I suddenly said, 'Herbert. Is Mr Baker, or Tamm in the house at the moment?'

'Mr Baker is, ma'am. He's in his room.'

'Ask him to visit me, please.'

'Yes, of course, ma'am.'

He turned and shuffled out with the tray at a dangerous angle as he shut the door.

I didn't know what I wanted to say, or wanted to know, but was sure something would come out of the conversation. I just hoped it wouldn't make things worse for any of us.

Nick Baker was a long time arriving. When I heard the knock at the door, I was ready to receive. I was seated in the main chair of the bedroom and fully dressed for lunch. Nick poked his head around the door and smiled awkwardly.

'You wanted to see me, Mrs Ryce-Hardin?'

'I did, Nick. Please come in. Have a seat. Some tea?'

He walked almost clumsily across to the second chair and sat facing me. 'No thanks, I'm good.'

He sat with both hands clasped and leaning forward. His eyes look tired and a little bloodshot. I had to assume times were difficult for him too. In one way he's suffered more loss than I had. In volume anyway, not necessary quality of people. That was a harsh thought.

'How are you?' I said quite lightly.

'Bin better, ma'am.'

'Quite a traumatic turn of events the other day. Don't you think?'

'Yes, ma'am. Traumatic is the word.'

As he spoke I could smell alcohol on his breath. The man had been drinking. Herbert said he had addiction issues.

I took a straight-line approach. 'Do you think my husband was right to let him go, Nick?'

'No, ma'am.' An instant answer. His hands writhed. 'We should not have let him get away with everything like that. Not justwalk out the door. Sorry, ma'am. But the Colonel knows best.'

I harrumphed and said, 'Not always. Believe me. Did you believe everything the man said, Nick?'

'No ma'am. Of course not. He's a liar and a trickster. We all know that, ma'am. He's a reputation for it.' He was having trouble speaking clearly.

‘So I understand. He made some comments about Jamison Willoughby. Do you think any of those were true?’ I could see him thinking. Should he say what he thought, what I wanted to hear, or what Charles would want him to answer? ‘Speak your mind, Nick. I won’t tell Charles anything that’s said here today. In fact, I’d prefer if you didn’t mention our little conversation.’

He seemed to relax a little and the hand-wringing reduced. He shrugged. ‘I’m not sure about Willoughby. He has a way....a way of influencing the Colonel. Know what I mean?’ I nodded. ‘What his history is....’ another shrug. ‘...don’t know. Anything to do with Justin and Naomi’s sanctions...don’t know. Really not heard any real proof of that. Still don’t trust the fucker though. Sorry, ma’am. Language...not suitable....’

‘Don’t worry. I’ve heard worse. What about Charles? Do you think the accusations against him are true?’ I watched him carefully. The hand-wringing increased.

‘In the army, ma’am....you’re told to obey without question. I got my orders from the Colonel...he got his from higher authorities. Where the level of responsibilities starts and stops is always a grey area. Especially when you’re at the bottom rung of a chain of command. I’m not good at this sort of thing, ma’am.’

‘You’re doing great. Carry on soldier.’

‘Thank you, ma’am. The Colonel HAD to do certain things during his tours of duty. You have to understand that. Only he knows what and why. I really can’t comment any further than that.’

‘I understand. Thank you for your honesty.’ Honesty be buggered. He was protecting Charles all the way.

‘It’s how I see it, ma’am.’

He was beginning to shake.

‘Have you breakfasted this morning, Nick?’

‘No, ma’am. Clean forgot.’

‘Humm. Has Charles planned anything for you today?’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Okay, so I’m not holding you up from anything right now.’

‘No, ma’am.’

‘Would you like something to eat?’

‘No thanks, ma’am. I’m fine.’

‘Perhaps a drink?’ I could see him hesitate. ‘What sort of drink,’ he was thinking. ‘I was thinking of having a sherry. Would you pour me one, please?’

‘Certainly, ma’am.’

He hurried over to my second dressing table. On a tray a bottle of sherry and a few glasses.

‘Have one yourself, if you would like.’ Of course, he would like.

‘Thank you, ma’am. It’s a bit early.....’

Sure it was.

He handed me my glass and his hand was shaking. He held one of his own and sipped half the glass. It seemed to sustain him.

‘Tell me about Justin. What sort of student was he?’

‘Student, ma’am? Not sure I...’

‘When you ran those courses of yours. You know, the SAS combat courses. It’s your full business now, isn’t it?’

‘Well, ma’am. The Colonel needed me here recently, so we’ve had to close it down for a few months or so.’

‘I see. Are you not out of pocket in any way?’

‘The Colonel’s very kind and considerate, ma’am.’

Of course he is, to you.

‘Oh, good. I know he values your presence here. And Tamm of course. But the courses? Justin and Naomi, how did they fair?’

‘Very well, ma’am. Top marks. Both of them.’

‘Good. Nice to hear. So... you taught them how to shoot?’

‘Yes, ma’am. An essential part of the course.’

‘Sniper rifles and the like?’

‘Part of the course, ma’am.’

‘How to kill?’

‘*Imaginary* kills ma’am. They’ve been hunting before. They’ve killed deer and such.’

‘Just deer?’

He was getting fidgety again. His glass was empty. ‘Help yourself to another.’ He tried to hide his haste but failed. ‘I heard a rumour that there was a hunting accident on that safari you all went on?’

He hesitated slightly, ‘Accidents are very common, ma’am. Happen all the time.’

‘Wasn’t someone hurt? Killed, I believe?’

‘Yes, ma’am. A local tribesman. Accidents happen mostly to them.’

He was getting nervous. The glass was already empty. I felt mean teasing him like this, but I needed answers.

‘Whose idea was it to put Justin and Naomi on one of your courses?’

‘Well, ma’am. I’d just started the business and needed todevelop the course. So...well....the Colonel suggested...’

‘I see. Charles.’

‘Well...not exactly....’

‘Do you think your classes could have made them into assassins, as The Magician suggested?’

‘No, ma’am. No way. Not your two. They were...well, exemplary.’

‘Exemplary. Glowing reports. Top of the class. Certificates to prove it. A year later both trying to kill people for money.’

He hung his head and looked at the glass. He could not answer that without damming himself, or Charles.

‘Perhaps The Brethren had something to do with all that, ma’am. I know I...we...didn’t encourage that sort of....’

‘So, it’s The Brethren’s fault, is it?’

‘I think it could well be. Ma’am.’

‘Had this not happened, this....assassination thing...would Charles have suggested Samantha do one of your courses?’

‘Well, ma’am. It’s a great character-building exercise. Corporations send their executives to us and we send them back better men.’

‘Better, perhaps. But at least alive.’

I was aware my anger was creeping in and tried to stop it. This man was partly to blame for the death of my kids and I wanted him to know that I knew - and did not forgive. But the truth was we were all to blame. None of us saw this coming. But we should have.

‘I think I’ll have a little nap now, Nick. Nice talking to you.’

‘Sure. Thank you, ma’am. And for the sherry. Very nice. I don’t usually....’

‘Not a word about this conversation to Charles, I’ll know if you did. It would severely disappoint me, Nicholas. And right now, I don’t think I can take much more disappointment. Understand?’

‘Completely, ma’am. I’ll be silent.’

‘See you do. Bye.’

He left hesitantly, returning his glass to the tray and closing the door on the way out.

I’d learnt nothing I didn’t already suspect. Those courses and the hunting trip in Africa started my kids on the downwards slope. The Brethren gave them the last push.

They promised Naomi fame and glory, or so she thought. But not the sort of fame and glory you go on to TV chat shows and boast about. No. A dark kind of glory only a select few people would appreciate.

Were they trying to prove something to their father? A successful military career behind him, he always wanted them to follow him down that road. But how would they have told him? How would he have found out? What would he have thought of their actions?

I dreaded to know the answer to those questions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

WILLOUGBY

Once, Senior Legal Counsel, Jacob Levy got his teeth into something, he never let go.

Thanks to Ryce-Hardin's wealth and influence, I had Levy briefed and primed to go within a few days. I now felt there was a certain amount of hurry up needed. Charles was changing his mind about a few things. My continued support was amongst them. The altercation with The Magician changed many things.

For the first few days after the event, the Ryce-Hardins went into a shell. I couldn't reach Charles, and Sara avoided me like the plague. I'd tentatively approached Jacob Levy to take on my case. Now he'd come back willing to proceed. But Charles was not available to sign the cheques. All I could get was a hand-written letter of intent to pay. Fortunately, Levy was willing to accept that. Also, and let's be fair in my favour, mine was a very high-profile case. Especially as I "let slip" that other counsellors had shown interest in taking this case.

It was no secret to get me cleared of all charges would release my own money. I could certainly pay off Levy easily with a signed a document to that effect. The danger always was....if I was found guilty.

Now....I know there's no evidence around to prove me guilty. I'm quite confident any court of law will not find me guilty of anything. MY problem isif the police rigged the evidence. I don't know how they could do that, but I've heard of it been done in the past. They were certainly after The Brethren and I was the only one left they could prosecute.

Levy understood my predicament and assured me nothing would get past his legal eagle eyes.

We had an hour meeting with a few of his assistants and managed to get through a lot of material. He'd quickly become familiar with the direction the prosecution was taking their case and gave me great encouragement we would win the day. Strongly implying he would "play dirty" if need be.

He was a tall, thin man with a completely bald head. Alopecia, I guessed. The tiny rimless glasses looked fashionable on his nose. But his smile was quite captivating. The jury must love him.

I made a delicate point that time was not on my side. What with my enforced poverty, and the possibility of me outstaying my welcome in the Ryce-Hardin household, could we accelerate the process somewhat?

I could see his legal mind processing that. I could imagine him seeing money floating away from him. The shorter the case, the fewer fees can be charged. So I shortened the fuse.

‘I can offer a Million-pound bonus to you, personally, if you could clear this problem within a week.’

His facial expression never changed. He explained the legal business never worked that way. Procedures had to be followed. But thanked me for the offer and changed the subject. After about ten minutes he dismissed his assistants to begin work on the case. When we had his meeting room to ourselves. He looked at me seriously, leaned on the table and said, ‘About this offer of yours. Can that be sent to an offshore account?’

A meeting with Charles was inevitable. So I managed to arrange a time to meet in his study. He closed and locked the door and we sat down with a bottle of whiskey between us. I don’t drink, so I had a Coke.

Charles looked five years older. He was thinner, and his tie was not done up properly. The charcoal grey suit was slightly creased from a preponderance to sit for long periods. There was even a stain on the lapel which he’d not seen.

I was in my usual suit, much to his annoyance. I could see his eyes dwell on the jacket. I wore this suit for a purpose and to hell with anyone who didn’t like it.

‘How are you, Charles?’

‘For a man whose world has been turned upside down, okay.’

‘All a bit of a shock, I should say.’

‘Shock is not the word. What was your opinion of the fellow and what he had to say?’

I had opinions, but few I wanted to share. ‘I still say he’s guessing. Still say he’s a trickster. Can’t believe a word he says.’

‘What about that tape recording? Pretty damning. Pretty convincing.’

‘That could all be faked.’ It could, too.

‘That was my daughter’s voice, no doubt at all.’

It was certainly very convincing. I asked, ‘So you really believe your children turned into assassins? Just because this stranger said so?’

‘I think it’s a strong possibility. The fellow needn’t have bothered. He could’ve emailed the recording. Wrote a note or called on the phone.’

‘But you wouldn’t have believed him then, would you?’

‘Probably not. He risked his life to tell us that. And to tell us to leave him alone. I think I have to do that now.’

I did not want to hear that, I needed Charles for support. The next stage of my plan was crucial. I had to turn him away from this decision. ‘They’re just empty threats. Nothing more.’

‘He kidnapped my daughter!’ Charles said staring at me as if I was an insensitive moron.

‘No he *didn’t*. He TRICKED you into believing he kidnapped your daughter. He’s a paid killer, not a kidnapper.’

‘Even so. I’ve my family’s’ safety to consider here. I’ve given much thought to all this and decided that my personal vendetta against The Magician should end.’

‘Why? I don’t understand. Your two children were KILLED by this man. He admits it.’

‘One. He shot and killed one. The other....well....you heard.’

‘I don’t understand why you believe this man. He’s a liar and a manipulator. He’s trying to get you to think the way he wants you to.’

Charles rounded on me with a glare that was all business. ‘And you’re not?’

I was on thin ice here. ‘I have your interests at heart, Charles. I thought you fully understood that.’

‘And your interests?’

‘Only if they coincide. And with regard to The Magician, they certainly coincide.’

‘Well, that’s got to change.’

This was bad news. ‘I’m sorry you feel that way, Charles. Really sorry. May I ask where this leaves me?’

‘In what way?’

‘With my case pending?’

‘I said I’d help you get started and I will do that.’

‘I appreciate that, Charles. You truly are a gentleman.’

‘But in the light of that meeting, I now have doubts that you’ll get off as easily as you claim to.’ Where was he going with this? ‘I think we need to reassess the level of my support and come to some agreement.’

‘Sure. Anything you say. Any ideas?’

‘Just one. I don’t want those sketches broadcast on TV.’

My jaw must have dropped, it felt that way. 'But that's a strong point in my defence! I need that publicity to deflect responsibility from me to The Magician. I *have* to do that!'

'Then find another way. You broadcast those, and he'll be back. And it won't be for you. It'll be for me. He made that clear. Or weren't you listening?'

I had to think quickly. 'So you're still going to give me financial support with my case?' He nodded and sipped the last of his glass. 'As long as I don't publish the sketches?' He nodded again.

I moved to him and took his glass. I refilled it with whiskey as I thought furiously.

'I feel that's fair. It goes without saying that I'll still be repaying all debts to you, Charles. The moment I gain access to my frozen accounts.'

'Understood.' I gave him the glass and a smile.

'Then everything is fine.'

'If only it were.'

'What's wrong, Charles?'

'This whole affair has...well...shaken me, Jamison. It's hard for me to talk about it. But you understand, your part of the situation. Sara doesn't understand, she can only see one thing and no other. But you and I are men of the world and know nothing is just black and white and seldom grey.'

I nodded. With no idea what he was talking about.

'Do you have kids, Jamison?' He looked at me with a sadness in his eyes I'd not seen before. He was always such a positive, go-ahead chap. I shook my head.

'Ahhh. Then perhaps I'm talking to the wrong fellow. But if you did, you'd understand. Whenever I used to think about my kids, perhaps just before an engagement or some dangerous mission, I always saw them as angels. Does that make sense?'

I nodded. 'Angels.'

'When on leave, I played with them as a father should. They were perfect kids. When I looked at photos, I remembered them as well behaved and small, perfect human beings and could feel proud of what Sara and I had done with them. But now....'

'What's changed?' I ventured.

'Everything.'

He drained the glass, and I took it for a refill for him. He seemed to sink into his comfortable over-stuffed chair and descended into maudlin reflection.

I tuned out for a while as I recalled he'd promised to continue paying for my legal actions. I needed to speed that up even more now. How long his generosity would last depended on how long the whiskey clouded his oncoming depression.

'...only to find your children have turned into animals. Killing for money and fun. I never brought them up that way. Never would.'

I took a chance and said, 'Didn't you send them on the SAS course, Charles? Did you not think that they'd get a feel for military-style action?'

He turned his head and glared at me. 'The army life teaches you discipline. Honour for your comrades and country. Not...meaningless slaughter. It never stood for that.'

I was careful what I said. I'm always careful what I say when I'm recording the conversation. You never know who'll be listening to this in the years to come. 'Well, Charles. I don't think you can beat yourself up over what they did. I believe...if what The Magician said is true....that it was an uncharacteristic outlet of their personalities and would have gone no further. I've never pulled a trigger in my life. I know you have. But I can imagine if I killed someone it would be an emotional shock. I'd be most unlikely to do it again unless threatened. Naomi said herself, they hadn't actually killed anybody.'

'But she pulled the trigger.' Charles said quietly as if it was a great disappointment to him.

'For the first time.'

'The only time. As it turned out.' He said almost wistfully now.

It was time to take my leave. 'The bang was the last sound we heard. How do we know The Magician didn't pull out a gun and shoot her? The bang we heard coming from his gun, not hers?'

'He was naked at the time, Jamison. Where would he hide a gun?'

I shrugged. 'He's *The Magician*. Anywhere.' He was not open to alternative scenarios in his present state. 'I must go, sir. My Council needs my attention and we have a meeting tomorrow to discuss strategy. I hope you feel better about all this soon. Time always heals.'

I slapped him on the shoulder and walked out the door. If I expected a comment or goodbye, I never heard it.

I closed the door quietly and left him to his darkening thoughts.

Levy appeared regenerated by the time I met him next

He had a plan and a set of meetings all arranged. He'd sent a car for me and we whisked around London meeting various experts in various fields. Levy said it had been hugely productive. I felt I'd been deposited from a whirlwind.

I was astute enough to know that all the visits added to the final bill. He was running up charges in case of a short retainer.

The next day I was summoned to attend a meeting with the Public Prosecutor for my case. Again the Limo arrived with a chauffeur with uniform and into the city we went.

The rest of the day was a blur. Later, I found myself sitting in Charles's study with a brandy in my hand and him sitting opposite me.

'Dropped, you say?' he said for the third time.

'All charges dropped. No evidence. See, I told you Charles. Ye of little faith. *Dropped.*'

'All charges?'

'Every one. No DNA link with the body of the girl. Sorry, ...your daughter. All charges are dropped from the Brethren case. As the leading suspects are dead, they cannot testify, or produce evidence either way. No evidence exists to link me with any nefarious activities of the Brethren's business.'

'So good news all round, then. I suppose congratulations are in order, Jamison?'

'They are indeed.'

I sipped the brandy I hadn't asked for and tried to compose my churning mind.

As of tomorrow, all my assets are returned to me. That gave me a warm glow. My wife had petitions that needed sorting out and she would get millions. But there were several investments and property entangled deals I'd made that she wouldn't get her hands on. Now I could.

I needed to plan for my future.

'I want to give this to you, Charles.' I handed him a cheque. 'Without you, I'd not have been able to clear my name. At least not for several years, perhaps.'

'Pleased I could be of help.'

'I'm indebted. Anything I could ever do for you....'

Charles waved away my offer. He sat in his chair and looked at the carpet. I needed to end this conversation and get out of his hair.

I stood for a moment and took a last look around the room. I noticed the shiny gun the Magician had given to Charles. It lay on a shelf in one of the bookcases. Obvious, but not intrusive. He'd see that every day and be reminded of his children and their deaths. I would have thrown it out immediately.

'I shall pack my things and leave then, Charles?'

'Okay. I hope you're going to buy a new suit now you've money again?' He gave a slight laugh.

'Several.' I said.

'Where will you stay?'

'At a nice hotel. Until my wife has scavenged her share of my fortune. Then somewhere nice in town.'

I stood up to shake his hand. His grip was weak and his eyes watery as he took a last look at me.

We'd been through some rough times recently together. It was a partnership that was over. There'd been an uneasy friendship there too. That also was over.

'Goodbye, Jamison. Stay out of trouble this time.' He knew he'd not see me again.

I feared I might hear from him again.

Especially after I published the sketches.

PART FIVE – Seek and you shall find

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

JAGGER

I think it went well.

As well as I hoped for. I made my point. Now sit back and wait to see if it worked.

I was certainly nervous before going in. I'd done as many stretching exercises as I could and loosened up. Any violence takes its toll on a tight body. I'd rehearsed several speeches and hoped they were appropriate and that I'd all my facts correct. I'd done as much research and preparation as I thought possible.

I had to choose my disguise very carefully. I was in great danger of being fully exposed. So I needed material that took time for someone else to remove. It would be at that stage I'd give the signal to Lucie to call me. Hopefully stopping anyone from fully unmasking me.

I'd contact lenses and cheek pads and I'd shaved off all my growth of beard and all my head hair. I was bald. Bald men are less likely to be recognised when wearing hair, rather than the other way around.

Shoe lifts would work briefly as I'm sure the shoes would be the first to go. I'd a special prosthetic cream that appeared to wrinkle and age the skin, over all my body. My hope was that even with everything taken away, they still would not recognise me if I passed them later on the street.

Baker laid into me very hard. I could've parried and taken him at any time. But the whole point was I needed to look defenceless. What're a few bruises compared with a lifetime of peace and tranquillity?

I was counting on the teenage girls going to the cinema and not changing their minds, as youngsters are prone to do. I guess I got a little lucky there. Even if they'd chosen something different, it would only be either Samantha or Tamm calling in that might blow the whole thing.

If that happened, I'd my exit strategy of Lucie in the van around the corner. The bright shiny new gun had also a recording device and Lucie should hear everything that was said in the room.

The introduction of Naomi's voice was the killer part of the presentation. Her parents knew it was genuine. But they weren't prepared to see the real daughter emerge from the eerie soundtrack of her last moments on earth.

To mention the missing picture which I'd taken while in the disguise of Michigan, was an added pointer that I could come and go freely in their

house. The thought that someone could bypass all security arrangements, would make anyone twitchy and uncertain. All I wanted was to have no more chasing The Magician.

I hope I'd done enough to get Ryce-Hardin suspicious of Willoughby and vice versa. I didn't want a strong association developing that would come at me again in the future.

Sara Ryce-Hardin was the key. If I could win her over, I had Charles. If I had Charles, Willoughby would be cut adrift. It looked like his legal proceedings would tie him up for a while, whether he ever got prosecuted was a variable.

Sara seemed the most affected by the sound of Naomi's voice. It'd been one of the better ideas I had to record her visit to my workshop. I'd had a feeling someone had been in there sometime before. I knew someone was out there after me and it took little deduction to realise they could've shot me at any time. What was they waiting for, I'd thought.

I'd set up the two weapons and a recording device. I also had a complete video of the event, but I kept that back, you never know. I'm not sure seeing me naked was anyone's idea of fun, apart from Lucie that is.

Sara now knew her children were not the innocents in this story. They were turning into cold-hearted killers. Taking joy in taking life. I was never like that. I don't know anyone who likes that. They were freaks. Had they lived.....?

I hoped she might now be more at ease knowing the truth about their deaths. Charles, too. But would he really accept the truth? Time would tell.

Willoughby was as slimy as an eel and wriggled out of trouble almost too easily. Him, I'd have to keep an eye on.

But for a while, I felt I had a breathing space.

So...overall a successful mission. Certainly worthwhile having a stab at. Although Lucie was a nervous wreck by the time I opened the van door.

'What the fuck was all that about?' she said throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me repeatedly on the lips. I liked it, but I'd things I wanted to do more. At least in the immediate few minutes.

'No problems. Let's get going. We don't want a posse after us. Do we?' I added with a smile.

She started the engine and drove away. I removed all makeup and disguise and changed clothing. I slid into the seat next to her and she looked at me.

'You're hurt.'

‘Not really. I expected it to be worse. I took painkillers beforehand. How’re you?’

‘Me? Fine. Shaking like a leaf. And you do this for a living?’ She said wide-eyed.

‘Not often. It was fun though. Right?’ I grinned at her to ease the tension.

‘I was worried. No, not worried. Way beyond worried. Terrified. They could’ve killed you!’

‘Not really. No point. I’m more valuable to them alive.’

‘They wanted to take you to the garage. What did that mean?’

‘Only Baker wanted to do that. If he had, I would’ve killed him.’

‘You sure?’

I gave her my confident look. ‘I’m very sure.’

‘And what’s this about Spain? We’re going to Spain now?’

‘No. Distraction. If they do start looking again, I wanted them to think we’re abroad.’

‘Good. I don’t want to go to Spain. I don’t want to learn....’

‘...another language.’ I finished for her.

She was smiling now.

There were a few minutes of silence and we both adjusted to the aftermath of high adrenaline. After a while, she said, ‘What happens now?’

‘We go back to our lives.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that. What else do you want to do?’

She shrugged and remained silent. Then decided to ask, ‘It’s not all over. Is it?’

My turn to shrug. ‘Don’t know. If they’ve got any sense, they’ll drop the hunt The Magician thing. Leave us alone. I couldn’t have made it any plainer.’

‘So we’re back to the low-profile life again?’

‘Fraid so.’

‘Okay. If it keeps you alive that’s okay with me.’

‘Let’s see how it goes. In a while....who knows...?’

She set her face as she concentrated on driving. I knew that look. At some stage, she was going to question me again as to why it was all so necessary? Don't you think you're over-reacting? Must we!

We made several detours. A stop to fill up with petrol, so I could see what traffic passed us and whether they made another appearance later. I swept the van for planted bugs but knew there wouldn't be any. The van had not been left unattended since I swept it in my home garage earlier that morning. When I was sure we hadn't been followed we made our way to the farm.

We both felt at home there now. We had a modicum of security to enjoy as well. The electric gates were alarmed. All doors and windows are too. Some CCTV cameras and a central monitoring station to see everything going on around the house.

I pride myself in that this was a much bigger and better farm than the Kobay's lived in. At least the buildings were liveable. Our fields were farmable, but I didn't have the staff to do that yet but would one day.

Our grounds were big enough for me to take a ride around on my 350 cc motorbike and I get a sense of joy and freedom doing that.

The downside is I feel I have to disguise every time I go out. We have rooms that needed modernising, but we're limited to what I can do myself. I won't have contractors working here. You never know.....

I promised Lucie it would only be for five years. If all went well, it might be for less.

We lay by the indoor pool and let the sun warm us through the glass of the huge window wall to the south. I swim every day and use the gym too. Lucie has never believed in proper exercise. 'I get mine at night.' She used to say. Now there's no more "night" for her, she's putting on a few pounds. "Contentment" she blames it on. I respond with, "Laziness". At least the pool helps keep her supple and her respiratory system energised. Although there's always work to do around the farm, as I don't employ people we try to do all the work ourselves.

We have chickens and pigs. We haven't started to consider any crops yet. That's a lot of work and only worth it if you intend to sell the final product. We don't need to do that, a small vegetable garden will see to our meagre needs. We've enough money to last our lifetime. But I bought a farm and it should be farmed. We're still considering that option.

I was feeling sleepy. Partly contentment. partly the over-active sex we'd just enjoyed. And partly because I was mentally tired.

It had been a week since my bout with the Ryce-Hardins and Willoughby. There was a reaction that was a mixture of relief and expectation. Neither dominated and so it left a sense of slight anxiety. Lucie

picked up on it. She's sharp like that. Anything to do with male emotions she claims to be an expert at.

'What's up?' I turned to see her looking at me with sadness in her eyes. 'You should be happy.'

'Who said I'm not?'

'I do. What's up?'

'Nothing.' She lay back and made a grunting noise that some people would call a hurrmph. 'Absolutely nothing.' I confirmed.

She suddenly turned and used her elbow for support as she said quietly, 'Are you getting bored with me, sweetie?'

I smiled. 'You? Never!' She forced a smile and lay down again. 'Why did you ask? Have I done something? Not done something?'

'Just asking.'

'You don't JUST ASK anything. What do you mean?'

'I take it personally if you're not happy. And I can tell you're not happy.'

'I am happy. Just....distracted I suppose.'

'Ryce-Hardin kind of distracted?'

'I suppose so. Yes.'

'What can I do to help?'

'Just be here. Be yourself. And get me a glass of water, slave. Now would be really good.'

She slithered out of her lounge and joined me in mine. There was not enough room, so she lay on top of me.

'You're getting heavier.' I took the opportunity to taunt her.

She fake-punched me and said, 'And you're too obsessive about your fitness. You HAVE retired, haven't you?'

'Fitness is for life...sweetie.' I smiled at her.

'Listen, Superman. I'm here for you. God knows why...but I love you. But...I can't live outside your life. I want to be part of it. A major part of it. I know you're *thinking*, I know something's going on in that brain of yours....' She slowly tapped my forehead. '...and I want in. Is that too much to ask?' I took my time. I frowned as if thinking. A fake punch again. 'I'm serious. Answer me, Jag!'

'After twenty years it's hard to change old habits. I've been so used to watching everything around me. Figuring what could happen if this, or that

happened. This, or that were to change. If I seem distant at times ...I'm just concentrating on something else.'

'Okay. So now it's time you concentrated on ME.'

'I like concentrating on you. But, like everything else, I can't do it every minute of the day...'

'Why not? I'm not worth it?' I could see the smile at the corner of her lips.

I took a deep breath. 'It's because you're worth it that I'm concentrating on other things. I have to be sure you're going to be safe.'

'It's you they're after. Not me.'

'That's just the point. They might come after you, to get at me.'

'But they don't know about me. How can they...?'

'There are ways. Nothing is a secret in this world. People can always be found. I've made a living at it. If I can do it, so can others.'

'Are you sure they can make a connection between us?'

'Sure...no. Is it possible...yes?'

She was frowning now.

'I was The Magician. The man that could do everything. For years no one could find me, not know who I was. Twenty years like that. So....I decide to retire, and all hell breaks loose! In the aftermath what do we have? Still, no one knows who I am, or where I am. Things haven't changed. And that's exactly how I want them to stay.'

She tried to smile, knowing I was trying to stop her from worrying. 'And that's why we're both hiding away in a remote farm. Hidden from the world, who don't know we exist.'

I nodded and smiled. 'Over-cautious. Yes, I know. Necessary? I think so. Please try to understand that.'

'I'll try.' She said kissing my nose. She hesitated and kissed me on the lips like she meant it. I could never resist her charms and found I *was* able to concentrate just on her.

At least for a while.

The gimmicked S&W .38 I gave to Ryce-Hardin was a mixed blessing.

In one of the handles was a short duration listening module that allowed Lucie to hear everything in the room. After a few hours the battery would run out and it would stop broadcasting. We'd been able to hear what went on in the study after I left but was disappointed because everyone left

quickly after I did. The study was empty, and no one was saying anything. And then the battery ran out.

In the other handle was a pure digital recording device that would switch on when a sound was detected and switch off during silence. This did not broadcast and so would not be picked up by any electronic sweep.

The problem now is, I had to collect the data module and manually swap it for another. All this before I could listen to what had been recorded in the study since my visit.

So once again I had to go into the jaws of hell, the Ryce-Hardin mansion.

To minimise risk, I decided to wait until the house was empty. Certainly without Willoughby, or Charles present anyway. I detested the thought that I might have to wait hours, or even days, in full makeup until they'd both left the house.

If I was on a sanction, I wouldn't think twice about it. It would be considered part of the job. But I was retired. I kept having to tell myself.

So I decided to short-circuit the outside surveillance. I made a series of phone calls to the Ryce-Hardin household. In a disguised voice of an investigating police officer, I asked to speak with Mr Jamison Willoughby. Herbert, the butler and general factotum answered. By the third call, I had everything I needed to know.

'Mr Willoughby is no longer resident at the household. I can obtain a forwarding telephone number if you wish, sir?'

'No need, thank you. Is the master of the house in, please?'

'Mr Ryce-Hardin is in London for the day. May I take a message?'

'No thanks. I will call another day. The matter is not urgent.'

'Thank you for calling sir. Good day to you.'

I had all day. I had to take this opportunity, ride my luck while I could. I got prepared and set off to the noble mansion of the heroic Colonel Ryce-Hardin. I appeared as Tea Michigan again and looked at Herbert with a smile on my face. 'Sorry to disturb you, Herbert. But I would like to see Mr Charles for a few moments. I promise not to take up too much of his time.'

'Mr Charles is unavailable at the moment, sir. Shall I take a message, or say you called?'

'Ahh. Well, that is fortuitous, really. This is embarrassing, Herbert. Perhaps you are the man to help.'

'If I can, sir.' He inclined his grey head, showing the large bald spot creeping forward to his forehead.

‘I assume you remember me from my last visit here?’ he nodded, no change of expression on his face. ‘Well, I assume you know that I...well...borrowed a photograph from Mr Charles’s study.’ Again a slight incline of the head in acknowledgement.

‘Poor show, I know. But I had my reasons. Sometime later I’d like to pass on to Mr Charles the results of the investigation it helped me with. In the meantime, I’ve come here to return it.’

‘Very good of you, sir. I shall see to it personally.’

‘Thank you, Herbert.’ I said holding the photograph for him to take but hanging on to it just out of his reach. ‘One other thing. I noticed from my previous visit another photo, I’d like to take a second look at, if I may?’

Herbert was now not sure.

‘It is also vital to the investigation. I assume you understand the ...problems with Justin Ryce-Hardin?’

‘It is not my Perdue to be involved with the family business, Mr Michigan.’

‘I understand that. But I’m sure you’d want the Ryce-Hardins to have all the facts about their missing children. I can supply a lot of them. But only if I have help with my investigation.’

‘Are you from the police, sir?’

‘Certainly not. The police will not discover half of what I can. I just want to look at the photograph. You can stand right beside me.’

Against his better judgment, he opened the door wider, and I stepped in. He closed it gently and started a slow march towards the study. I held on to the photograph as he opened the study door and let me step ahead of him. I waited until he had caught me up and replaced the photograph very carefully where I’d taken it from.

‘There. Back into its rightful place. As good as new. This is the photograph I needed to view again. May I?’

I pointed to one on a shelf of a large bookcase. I chose it because lying next to it was the S&W. I pretended to study the photograph while I surreptitiously moved the new module into the palm of my hand.

‘Ahh. Just as I thought. Great news. Good. I thank you, Herbert. Ahhh...what is this?’ I picked up the gun and could hear an intake of breath from Herbert.

I twisted and turned the weapon and held it up to light as I prattled on. I twisted the grip, and the module fell into my hand while I slipped in the new one. Twisted the grip, and the job was done.

‘Unless I am mistaken, this is a very valuable piece here, Herbert. I have to assume that Mr Charles knows what he has here?’

Herbert remained unmoved. I returned the item to its proper place.

‘Hand-built. One of only a hundred ever made. A gift?’ I placed it carefully back in its exact position.

Herbert didn’t change expression, just turned sideways to indicate my time was up. I nodded and headed for the front door.

‘As I said, Herbert, I’m so embarrassed by the borrowing of the picture. Please convey my apologies to Mr Charles and my regrets that we couldn’t meet again. I shall be in touch with information shortly. Good day to you.’

‘And you, sir.’

The door closed slowly and quietly behind me.

I drove home with the usual precaution and arrived two hours later. Lucie was in the kitchen and she hugged and kissed me.

‘How’d it go?’

‘Fine. No probs.’

‘Good. Lunch nearly ready.’

We sat at the kitchen table and ate a light lunch. I absentmindedly flicked through the channels as background distraction and stopped in mid-chew. She saw the look on my face and turned to the TV on the wall.

There was a sketch of my face.

And it looked quite accurate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

NICK BAKER

They let the fucker go!

I couldn't believe it. The Colonel's cracking up. After all he said, all he's gone through! We get the bastard, have our hands around his throat and he walks away. I got a few good shots in first. But he walked out as if I hadn't touched him. A tough fucker, but I could take him. Any day. The opportunity is all I need.

All that crap with the recording. Who believes that shit? He's The Magician. It's what he does. Deception, illusion, trickery. Look at the Samantha debacle. He hadn't even kidnapped her! I knew that, but those daft buggers....!

'Just leave me alone' crap. Please! I'd leave him alone. In an anthill in the desert. That's where. And that'll be too good for him.

I'm out of cash and the Colonel's not taking visitors. Since I shut the business to help with the Colonel's home problems, I've no income. I've no savings, never have. A man can't live on nothing. The Colonel said he would provide for me and Tamm. Even Tammo's fucked off somewhere now. Don't know where. I'm out of everything. Especially my little comforts.

I can't face going back to running those stupid training courses again. I know it's military and all that, but it's not real...action. I want to run, hide, fight. Kill if necessary. Get the blood moving through the veins. The thrill of the hunt, the chase, the kill. To overcome the enemy, you have to *have* an enemy. Not office workers on a bonding exercise.

I've hardly seen the Colonel in a week. I saw him briefly as we crossed paths in the hallway. All he said was, 'What sort, of course, did you put Justin and Naomi through?' He walked away without an answer, leaving me thinking what he meant by it. Was he shifting the blame to me? Did he believe the lying bastard Magician?

I had a scary meeting with Mrs RH the other day. Scary in that she didn't want the Colonel to know about it. There were some strange questions about what the Colonel did in the army? I don't know what she wanted me to say, but I was loyal to the Colonel. Always am, always will be. Then she started to question me about the course I'd put her children on. Her too! Did I think it contributed to them becoming murderers? What fucking rot is that?

The world's gone mad. Official!

Where is Tammo? I need a ride into town to buy some stuff. I'm tempted to borrow a bottle from the study, but I daren't. Not yet anyway.

I feel useless just hanging around. I was born for action. When's *that* going to come again? Not around here.

Herbert told me that Willoughby's left. All very pleasant, apparently. But I'm glad to see the slimy fucker go. He's a bad influence on the Colonel. Now the Colonel's in a deep funk and someone's got to get him out of it. I hope Mrs RH is up to it. I could help if I could get near him.

I had a call today that's set me back on my heels a bit.

I got hold of Tammo and we went to the local pub to discuss it. He's become a tight-fisted bastard. He hardly drinks at all and won't pay for a round if he's not drinking. I've no money so it was a very dry affair.

'So what exactly did he say?' Tammo leaned close to me and looked steadily at my eyes. I don't know what he expected to see, but he glared unblinking.

He said, 'Would either of us be interested in getting hold of The Magician again. This time, to finish the job? That's what he said, very words.'

'Meaning?' Tammo said seriously, but I laughed anyway.

'What it means. It means...what it means. Willoughby's going after The Magician again.'

'Won't the Colonel be upset by that?'

'Why should he? It's Willoughby doing it, not the Colonel.'

'Didn't he sayThe Magician was going to blame the Colonel if ANYONE came after him?'

'Yeah, but. The Magician. Tricks an all. Didn't mean it. Right?'

'Does the Colonel know about this call?'

'No. Willoughby said not to tell him. Made a big point about it.'

'I can see why.'

'But we could get the bastard, Tammo. Not let him walk away. Clever talk and tricks won't sway Willoughby. We get to....kill the fucker. You and me. Think of Thorny, Chocolate....'

'Yes, I know all about that. And I do think about them. But the Colonel's going to be mad if we go along with this. Think, Nicker. What else did Willoughby say?'

'Not much. I was so happy to hear the first bit.'

'What does he need us for? Did he say that?'

‘To help. He just said to help.’

‘Muscle, or dirty work, I bet.’ Tammo is such a negative person at times.

‘So what? The target is The Magician. The end game is revenge. For us. For The Fabulous Baker Boys. Final closure for the Colonel.’

‘There is no Fabulous Baker Boys, Nicker. Not any more. Those days are gone.’

I suddenly thought of something that upset me. ‘You do still want to get your hands on this fucker who killed our men, don’t you?’

‘I’d like to yes. But not without the approval of the Colonel. Not just go blindly following Willoughby. Just the other day you were calling him all the bastard names you could think of. Now you want to work with him. Get into bed with him?’

‘You’ve changed, Tammo.’

‘You’ve not changed enough, Nicker. You need to...sober up and start to think like a soldier again. We need to talk to the Colonel.’

I grabbed his arm and hung on. ‘No! We mustn’t tell the Colonel. Willoughby said not to. Made a point of it. Hey! What do ya mean sober? I am sober!’

‘Whatever. We can’t do this, Nicker. After all the Colonel’s done for us.’

‘The Colonel never gave us £500,000, did he? All those jobs we pulled for him. What did we see, twenty grand tops? Mostly ten grand.’

‘What’re you talking about half a mil? Willoughby offer that?’

‘Sure did.’

‘You just said that was all he said, help him find The Magician. You’re making this up.’

‘Am not. Ask him. I’ve his mobile number here. Somewhere. Confirm it all. Then make up your mind. This is our signing off fee. Our life bonuses. Our retirement funds. All in one hit.’

‘Half a mil each, or shared?’

It was then I knew he was in. I leaned really close and mimed the word ‘EACH’.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

WILLOGHBY

I hoped I'd distanced myself enough from Charles.

I didn't want him rampaging against me now. I felt we'd parted quits. A give and take relationship that was finally over. Each to go our separate ways. But I knew he wouldn't be happy when I put those sketches on TV.

Levy arranged it and expected to make a killing using my name to boost his career. What did I care as long as he kept his side of the bargain? He pushed himself full in front of national TV cameras proclaiming the injustice to a valued member of the community. Vilified by the police and haunted by the thought that the killer of a young girl and all my upright colleagues remained still out there a free man. Justice is what was needed. A killer off the streets. Where were the police now when they were needed the most?

It was an impassioned plea. I almost believed it myself.

What surprised me the most was the response.

That Michigan idiot was partly right. There were a lot of loonies coming out from the woodwork. Levy was costing me a fortune to sort the wheat from the chaff. I thought he might be the right man for the job. You need to know the mind of a killer, a criminal, someone outside the law, to know when there's a genuine claim. Many claimed to see him, even had lunch with him, slept with him and one claimed to have married him.

It was three days before Levy called me into his office and we sat down and went through those that he thought might be genuine. There were two hundred!

Of course, he didn't have the time to research each one himself, but his staff could cope with that. At a cost to me. I reminded him of an additional off-shore payment and perhaps the staff could manage this project at a reduced cost. Especially as the capture of The Magician would reflect well on Levy's practice. The publicity would be worth millions. So any public knowledge of how much an innocent man was charged by his lawyer might not look good when viewed later on in the glare of the media.

He saw my point and praised me for my foresight and insight. But it was to be another week before he got the suspects down to ten. He suggested we had them all in at one sitting, went through them as interviews and decide if any were worth pursuing.

The big problem now....if they'd good information of the whereabouts of the Magician, we needed to be cautious. We didn't want to frighten the target off. We wanted him to remain in his hidey-hole, so we could catch him.

So...if the informant proved genuine, they had to be kept silent until the raid was over.

I really didn't think it would be this hard work. If you offer a £1m reward, you had to be sure the recipient had earned it. That meant a lot of work from our end too.

Michigan had been right after all.

The interviews took six hours. I was exhausted after all that. Unbeknown to everyone else, I recorded the conversations. You never know when this material could be useful. Several times I had to change the card in the machine. I'd transfer the data later to my larger drive and secure it away with all the others.

I was feeling more my old self again. It'd taken me five years to develop The Brethren. It was an excellent concept, and I'd like to do it again. But I feel the police have not fully forgiven and absolved me. I feel they'd keep an eye on me for some time to come. I'd have to be extra careful, extra vigilant in everything I did from now on.

The concept of The Brethren was that "bigger can be better". If there's an amalgamation of small criminal organisations, pooling their resources, their money, their tame legal aids and policemen - the overall strength of the organisation would be greatly improved. Perhaps the income per capita is not as high, but one person earning you ten pounds is not as good as ten people earning you five pounds each.

Individual crime organisations were targeted by me to become part of the overall scheme. Each organisation elects a Board Director, each sit on the board with me as President.

They were only invited to join if they'd managed their operations well enough not to be on the police radar. It was essential every member be upstanding in the eyes of the law and the public.

The members run their own business as before, but with the added consideration of not stepping on toes and upsetting joint interests of other Brethren members. In addition, the support from the membership helped out in times of trouble, or unforeseen difficult situations.

The problem was always controlling the octopus with many arms. That's what I'm good at. Unilateral control.

There was a monthly Board Meeting, held in a different location each time. Future activities were discussed and funded. Current activities monitored, and assistance provided when needed. The venue was always double-checked for electronic surveillance devices.

On their last meeting, clearly, someone didn't do that. Had I been there it would've happened, and we'd all be alive today. But I was in prison. I

suppose that's one thing I could thank The Magician for, my life. Ironically I was now desperately trying to end his.

In the early days, I'd tried to interest Mario and Primo in the concept, but Mario wasn't interested. Primo seemed attracted to the larger picture. Had he lived, he would've probably become an associate.

All the tentacles of contacts we had then have now withered and died. We used to have police on a payroll, some government officials. Court officials, even some jury members. Life was good. But now all gone. Never to be fully resurrected.

I needed a new project. I had a few ideas. One option was for The Brethren to re-emerge as a charity, helping people resolve problems the law cannot. Squeaky clean, but with a more undertow of covert missions.

I had to drag my mind back to the work at hand.

A very overweight man was sitting in the interview chair and Levy was giving him a grilling. It wasn't working. The man could hardly understand or speak English.

I looked at my list. His name was József. No second name. The info sheet said he'd met The Magician and had recognised the sketch as accurate.

'When do I get money?' was his mantra.

'When are you going to give us information?'

'About what?'

'The man in the sketch...' Levy waved the sketch described by Orlando Stone. '....this man?'

József pointed at the sketch. 'Him, Magician. Nasty man. Kill everyone. Gyilkos. Killer.'

'Who? Who did he kill?'

'Everyone.'

'Everyone, yes. Name them.'

'István. Károly. György. András. Luca. My friend, Zoltán. Everyone. He kill everyone. My money?'

'No money until we can find him. Do you know where I can find him? This..... Gyilkos?'

'Herceghalom. Farm. Kobay, farmers. Herceghalom. You find him there. My money?'

'No. He's not there. He left there. We need to know where he is *now*. Do you know?'

'Kobay. He with the Kobay. Farmers. Herceghalom.'

Levy looked at me and shrugged. 'He's useless.'

I leaned forward and showed him the disguise sketch. 'He looked like this?' József nodded. 'Exactly like this?' Again, a nod.

I showed him the reconstruction sketch. 'Could he look like this?'

He leaned in closer and shrugged. Levy was right, useless.

Levy smiled and stood up. 'Thank you for your time, József.'

'My money?' József said also standing.

'No information. No money. Sorry. That way out, please.'

'Money!' He was immobile.

I sensed a problem and moved to the door. I slipped outside and picked out the three biggest men on Levy's staff and said, 'Levy needs you quickly, now, please.'

I let them hurry into the interview ahead of me and was in time to see József pressing Levy up against a wall. It took the three men all their efforts just to restrain József.

This was not going to get any better. I pulled a cheque book from my pocket and waved it at József. 'József. Your money. Here. Look.'

I signed a cheque and entered £1m. 'Name?'

He looked at me but had let go of Levy. 'What's your name? I have to put your name on here, so you can get the money from a bank. Okay?' He nodded. I waited.

'Your name? József?' He nodded again. It was all I was going to get.

With a flourish, I entered the name, József. I handed him the cheque. He looked closely at it and then looked at me.

'Take it to the bank. Get your money.' I pointed to the door, and he slowly walked out.

'You paid him!' Levy said.

'No. I gave him a cheque with a squiggle for a signature. The bank's security can handle him. Who's next?'

Next was an odious Latino named Morrillo. He was greasy in every way and I felt we needed to disinfect the room after he left. He wore flashy clothes and tight leather trousers, Cuban heeled boots in fake crocodile skin. His fingers were full of rings and his neck full of gold.

'How do you know this man?' Levy showed the disguised sketch.

'He gave me this scar, here.' He pointed to a large three-inch scar on his cheek. 'And here.' Another on his collarbone. 'And here.' He lifted his

bright orange T-shirt to reveal a scar along his left side. 'That's how I know him.'

'This man?' Levy pointed to the sketch again.

'That man. I hate him. He attacked me. Beat me up. I did not know him. Out of the blue, you say. Beat me up. I am innocent.'

Levy picked up the reconstruction sketch. 'This ring any bells?'

'Bells, no. But he look like the man who beat me up.'

Levy was shaking his head. 'They both look like the one man who beat you up?'

'Yes. True. One man. He looked a bit of both.'

Levy looked at me before saying to Morrillo, 'And these sketches are quite accurate, then?'

'Accurate, I don't know. But they look like him, yes.'

Again a glance at me from Levy, 'And do you know where he is now?'

'No. No idea.'

Levy sighed and sat back before saying, 'You understand why we make an offer of a reward? We need information that will lead us to catch this man....' He waved both sketches at the Latino, who nodded. 'If you don't know where he is, there's no reward and you're wasting our time. And yours.'

'I not know where he is, but I have information. If that leads to you catching him....I get money, no?'

'No.I mean yes. If you have information that turns out valuable enough for us to track him down and catch him. Yes, you get the reward.'

'One million of the pounds, no?' Levy nodded.

'Okay.'

A smugness had settled on Morrillo. 'He beat me up. A girl...worked for me. He came to me and said, You no have her any more. Leave alone. I said no. He beat me up.'

Morrillo sat back and grinned at Levy.

'That it?' Levy said unmoving.

'What more you want?'

'Her name?'

'Oh...of course, Lucie...something.'

'Only something? We need her full name?'

He struggled to think. 'It was a working name. What was it now...Lucie....Lucie...ahh...Dern. That's a name.'

'Lucie Dern? And where can we find her now?'

'I don't know. It wasfive six years ago. She worked out of one of my apartments. *He* came along...'*Morrillo* pointed to the sketches, '...and told me to fuck off. He has her now.'

Levy and I looked at each other. I said, 'He has her now?' I pointed to the sketches.

'Of course. That was why he beat me up. He is now her...I don't know the word. Pimper? Is that right?'

'Pimp?' I volunteered.

'That's right. Pimper. He has her now. You find her, you find him.' A nod at the sketches on the table.

Levy stood and adjusted his bright red tie, sharp against the white shirt. He was smiling. 'We'll keep in touch, Mr *Morrillo*. Leave your phone number on the way out. And also the last known address of this girl, Lucie Dern. Thank you.'

Morrillo nodded to each of us and was smiling as he left.

'What now?' I asked.

Levy flashed a smile at me. 'We find Lucie Dern. And I know just the right man who can do that job.'

'We find Lucie Dern and we find The Magician.' I said. 'If they're still together?' I added.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

KYLE WILBER

The call from Jacob Levy didn't surprise me.

I already knew about the case, I knew about the reward. I even considered going for it myself. Then Levy's call - giving me a starting point others wouldn't have.

Levy and I go back a long way. When he needs anyone found, he calls me. He calls me his Rottweiler. Once my teeth are into somebody, I never let go. A good trait for a Bounty Hunter.

That's a glamorous term, of course, Bounty Hunter. Makes you think of Bruce Willis, or Jason Statham. It's not really glamorous. In fact, it's not glamorous at all. It's mostly boring, with breaks of tedium in between.

As a Bounty Hunter, you need to appear non-descript. I am just that. Slightly overweight now, but in my prime, I was very athletic. I've been at this trade for a long time and believe that physical prowess isn't the main part of being successful. Being smart is.

Hunting down people who don't want to be found is neither easy nor pleasurable. But it is profitable. But only if you're successful. I've only ever had one get away from me, that's because he died before I could get to him. I don't count that one.

It's also important to be the lead investigator for someone who's paying out the money. I've been on cases where two hunters have found the same person, both claiming the right to the prize money. The person who has officially registered interest with the principal gets the payment.

I'd a starting point and saw no reason to hang about any longer. I've a substantial bungalow on Hayling Island on the south coast. I locked it up and got into my BMW 3 series. I love the sound of the motor. Especially at around 4,000 revs.

With my permanently packed bag in the trunk, I set off for the address I'd been given. Some slum area in London.

Although the informant, Morrillo, gave information dating back a few years, I decided to check him out first. It was no surprise to find where he lived. The same flat as he claimed Lucie Dern originally worked out of.

There was no doubt in my mind that if Rico Morrillo had any more information, £1m would've drawn it out. No amount of persuading from Levy would get any more. However, we're all human and most of our brains are wired the same. We can forget things. Tiny little details. Unimportant details. Vital details. As a last resort, Rico would have to tell me all he knew and all

he'd forgotten. I can be very persuasive. He wouldn't like the experience, but what the hell. Morrillo was just being greedy.

It was daylight when I let myself quietly into Rico's apartment, number 345. It was empty. The furniture was cheap and sparse. The bedroom was the most furnished, and it took me a few moments to realise why. It was a working girl's bedroom, much like it had been for Lucie Dern. So the possibility was the occupant wasn't going to be Rico, but a girl run by him. So tonight it might be busy, but for now, she was out. I started to search.

I've a strict method of searching. If I'm looking for something, that's hard to find, there's no point in starting with the obvious places. Like drawers, under the bed. Wardrobes and so on. When people want to hide stuff, they get creative.

Loose floorboards are a favourite, especially when hidden under carpets. I started there. Nothing.

People often put small items, like jewellery in other items. Shoes, Flour cans in the kitchen. The freezer. Stuff like that. Nothing.

Taped under drawers or hidden in the bed springs. Still nothing. An hour had passed.

I had to think more creatively. Inside toilet cisterns. Hidden in empty shower gel bottles. Packets of headache pills. Packets of tampons. Other bathroom paraphernalia. Nothing.

I'd begun to accept that when Lucie Dern had left this place, she'd taken everything and anything that might have been a clue to her existence on this planet. Clever girl.

I got the impression that only a woman used this flat. Rico didn't "live" here.

One last try.

There's often a hidden place which is the rear side of the wall, or panel, that's between the door frame and ceiling. If you were able to step into a wardrobe, turn around and look up, there's a flat area, mostly unpainted because nobody sees it. A good place to hide things. It exists in kitchen cupboards and wardrobes.

In this bedroom, there was a slight shelf above the door frame. I ran my hand along and collected a lot of dust. But something else. I looked at it and it turned out to be an envelope.

It was addressed to Tamsin Ackroyd, at this address. The letter had nothing of interest in it but was addressed to Tam and signed Bea. The stamp was dated about six years previously, so it *might* be Lucie's real name.

I'd nothing else to go on so I made that assumption. Had Lucie missed it when clearing her things away?

On my mobile, I contacted a man I use a lot in the police. He gets me info not available to mortal people and the public. I gave him the name, the address I was standing in and a range of dates. He said he'd call me back.

I now had to decide whether to have a chat with Rico. It couldn't harm, I thought.

I let myself out and waited in the lobby downstairs. I'm an ordinary looking man. Not tall, not short. Slightly overweight for my age of forty-five. No distinguishing features. So when I approach someone with a view to getting the information, they don't see a policeman or detective, and certainly not a Bounty Hunter – they see a man about to ask the time.

Day turned into night as I sat waiting. People came and went. Mostly women on their own, or with men on their arm. I could tell the type of place this had become, Rico's type of place. At eleven that evening I spotted him. Levy had given me a good description.

I got into the same lift as him and got out on the same floor. I walked with him towards the room I'd recently searched, and he became suspicious. I smiled and said, 'Jacob Levy sent me to have a word with you.' He looked puzzled and guarded. 'It's about the million pounds?' I added to entice his interest.

His eyes lit up, and he looked up and down the corridor. He fumbled a key into number 345 and pushed open the door. I followed slowly, wary as always. There were no sounds inside and it took a moment to establish there was no one here. It looked the same as when I left it.

Rico threw the keys into a bowl on a stand by the door and threw himself into a soft chair in the living area. 'Fire away, amigo.' He said with a flash of bright white teeth.

I remained standing and said, 'Lucie Dern. Can you give me any more details about her?'

'I told the lawyer guy and the other guy everything I knew. She worked outa here. I guess that's why you're here now, right?'

'Right.' I said with a disarming smile. 'But her real name was....? Any ideas?'

He shook his head and beamed his dental work at me again. 'Nope.'

'Okay. Does the name Ackroyd ring a bell?'

He feigned a look of puzzlement before saying. 'Nope. Should it?'

'Tamsin Ackroyd?' Another shake of the head. 'She never mentioned that name to you? Ever?' Another shake.

‘When you met her. Was she using the name, Lucie Dern?’

‘I think so. Why all this name business? I thought you wanted to talk about the million quid?’

‘I *am* talking about the million quid. But you’re not listening or thinking hard enough to earn it yet.’

He sat forward a feral look coming to his face. ‘I’m still going to get the money, right?’

‘Only if we find the right man.’

‘So what’s all this Tammy...whatshername?’

‘She’s going to lead us to the right man. Only if you can tell us more. Think hard. Any detail will do?’

‘Look, amigo, I ain’t got time for this shit. Gotta go.’

He stood up and was surprised when I pushed him down hard back into the chair. He was more surprised when I sat hard on his lap, restricting his movements. Totally surprised when I stuck a needle in his neck.

‘This is a non-lethal cocktail of mine, Mr Morrillo. In a few moments, you’ll feel...dizzy, so I’m told. A few minutes later you’ll be in a state of half sleep, half wakefulness. I will guide you back in time and you’ll remember things you thought you’d forgotten. Can you understand all that?’

His eyes had glazed over. ‘No, of course, you can’t. You’re a carrot away from being a vegetable soup. But I hope you can speak.’

He gagged a little before he spluttered, ‘What....have...you...done...to.....me?’

‘Good, you can speak. Now think back in time. You’re in *this* room. Six years ago. You’re talking to your girl, *Lucie Dern*. Think back, back....are you there yet?’ A few moments later a slight nod.

‘Now....she’s telling you where she came from. Can you hear where she comes from?’

Again a delay before.... ‘South...Southport.’

‘Good. Southport, Lancashire?’ No reaction. ‘An address?’

‘No. Nothing. She never said.’

‘Okay. Parent’s names?’

‘Nothing. Never said.’

‘Was she ever married?’

‘No husband. She said.... when she was working for me, she was single.’

That made sense. 'Husband, boyfriend names?'

'Never said.'

It was all I was going to get.

'Okay, Rico, you slime ball. You'll get very tired in ten minutes, or so. Then you can sleep.'

I let myself out and checked the corridor was clear. I went out through the lobby and to my car a few blocks away. As I shut the door, my mobile rang.

'Yeah, Gerry.' I said to my police contact.

He gave me as much as he could find. I had a house address in Southport. Her parent's names. But both had died within the last ten years. From grief in knowing what their daughter did for a living, no doubt.

It'd be unlikely she'd return to her childhood stamping grounds. Rico had said she'd gone off with the hitman that beat him up. The man we thought could be The Magician. Where would he take her? Where would he set her up as a prostitute? Could be anywhere.

An infamous hitman suddenly hauls in a professional woman off the streets. Why? To make more money? Nah! He would be making millions from his main line of work. A pimp's money would be peanuts.

The girl. What did she look like? Was she pretty? Was he...was he a client? Could a client fall for a prostitute? Quite possible. In which case....he didn't take her away from Rico to be her pimp...he took her away tokeep for himself. This seems more likely.

I dialled another of my many contacts in the ministry departments. It rang for a while before it was picked up.

'Don? Kyle. Need info. Name, Tamsin Ackroyd. POB Southport, Lancashire. Check marriage certificates going back, say six years. Anywhere in the country. Check any records, driving license, mortgage. Anything you can find on that name. Yeah. Usual fee. Catch you later. Quick as you can, mate. Bonus if within twenty-four hours. Bye.'

Now what?

Dinner. Then back home.

Don came back within 24 and earned his grand bonus.

A driving license with a photograph, so now I'd know what she looked like. And a marriage certificate a year old. Husband's name Jagger Gilchrist. What a fucking silly name that is. I told him to email the documents, and I'd print them off later. After a few minutes of thought, I called Don again and

got him to do a trace on Jagger Gilchrist. Driving license, mortgage, land registry. Prison records. Military records. The works. It would take a few days, but I'd wait.

I packed a bag for a longer stay and headed for Hampshire. They had issued the marriage license in Petersfield. I decided to make my camp down there.

I found a nice hotel in the centre of town, right near the market square and settled in. I sourced half a dozen restaurants that met my exacting standards and that evening tested the first of them out. I eat well and live well. I get paid lots of money but feel I earn it too. They say you are what you eat so that makes me a Lobster and Pouilly Fumé kind of man.

I took a walk around the town before turning in for an early night. I'm not a man for pleasures of the flesh. Neither male nor female. I enjoy my food and freedom. I live life day to day and enjoy and savour every moment. At least, I try to. My biggest pleasure in life is being a success. To trace down and capture my quarry is my life's goal. After every success, on to the next one.

In bed, I read my Pliny, or Art of War and it sends me to sleep. I sleep the sleep of the righteous. Eight hours and a new day begins. New trails to follow, new villains to catch.

Later that day I got a call from Don. I don't often get excited, but at his news – I did.

It signalled how near was the endgame. I was excited because of how easy I'd tracked down one of the most notoriously invisible men in our modern history. The Magician. Don had found documentation of a farm in the near vicinity purchased by a Jagger Gilchrist. I had the address, and I got into the 3 Series and fired up the engine, along with my enthusiasm.

It took me fifteen minutes from Petersfield to find the address. It wasn't easy as it was a part, of a part, of a much larger estate. It was on the top of a hill and surrounded by fencing. A single-track lead from the small road up to another double bar electric gate. I could go no further. I circled the area and decided that there was one observation point I could use. I unpacked my surveillance and survival gear and set up a camp in amongst a small clump of trees. I'd a tripod with high-powered binoculars and camera attachment. I'd a good view of the front electric gate and a few yards forward from the front of the house. Not much, but it would have to do.

I was there two days and took only eight photographs. Two were clear, but not up to my normal professional standard. I studied the images on the small camera screen, enlarging them so I could see clearer. The woman was clearly Lucie Dern, ne Tamsin Ackroyd, now Tamsin Gilchrist. The man I'd not seen before but looked a lot like a sketch in possession of Jacob Levy. I

sat and thought things through. On making my decision I pulled out my mobile and dialled a number.

‘Jacob? Kyle. Fine thanks. Yes. I’ve found him. I’ve found The Magician.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

WILLOUGBY

I felt a powerful surge of emotion when Levy called to say they'd found The Magician.

I sat back in my chair and looked around my sumptuous hotel suite. My supper was on a tray before me, partly finished. One more step, I thought. One more action and I could get on with my life.

I was still unsure why catching this assassin meant so much to me. Sure, The Brethren was my baby, its members my family. But did I like them, no. Love them, certainly not. So what was it then?

The death of my dream. That's what it really was about. This bastard wrecked my dreams with a pull of a trigger. He planted a dead girl on me to imprison me. He took out two of my new and promising assets. I've always thought "hate" was too strong a word, but when it comes to The Magician – now, I'm not so sure if it isn't strong enough.

I took a few moments to savour the moment and stood to look out the window. The London night traffic was busy and as noisy as ever, but now somehow – reassuring again. This is where I belong. In the middle of a vibrant city. In the control seat. Driving an unstoppable vehicle.

But what to do next? After killing the killer, of course. But is that what I really wanted? The Magician dead? I thought about that for a while. Running the thought around my mind. I'm not a murderer myself. Never have been. Couldn't pull a trigger. So would I personally kill The Magician? No. Did I want someone else to pull the trigger? That was a big question!

My thoughts began to run in circles. I was trying to finish a jigsaw when the pieces were not all to hand yet. I called Levy back.

We spoke in economic terms. I wrote down the address where The Magician lived and his real name. I looked at my handwriting. Did I really have the man's identity at last?

'Where is he now?' I asked as casually as I could.

'Still inside. My man is on-site and has a visual on the house. What do you want me to do?'

'Keep him there. I'll get some men together and get down there.' I checked the address. About a two-hour drive. 'We'll meet your man there and make an entry plan.'

'Okay. Kyle is more than capable of getting him right now if you wish?'

'No! This has to be *me* that gets him. I *need* to be there. I want to see his eyes. His real eyes when he knows it's me that's brought him down.'

‘What’re you going to do after you meet him?’ Levy’s voice cautionary.

‘You don’t want to know.’

‘Understood. Be careful. You’re playing a dangerous game here, Mr Willoughby.’

‘He’s only one man, and he doesn’t know anyone’s coming.’

‘I wish you luck and to be careful. By the way. My man Kyle – he’s the one that deserves the reward. Just so you know.’

‘Okay. I’ll honour that.’

My next call was to Nick Baker. He sounded sleepy, and it took him a few seconds to remember who I was.

‘Nick. Willoughby. Are you awake?’

‘Yeah. Sort of. What ya want?’

‘We’ve found The Magician.’

‘What!’ Now he was awake. ‘Where?’

‘Hampshire. Can you get over to my hotel with Tamm? We need to get down there ASAP.’

There was a moment’s delay before, ‘Be there in an hour.’ The line went dead.

I sat back and tapped the handset gently against my chin. Was it really a wise move to involve Nick and Tamm? They’d just as much a desire to get The Magician as I did. Maybe a little more. But Nick was so...inconsistent. According to Charles, anyway.

The Magician was notoriously slippery. But who else could I get to help? A thought crept into my mind. I picked up my mobile and flicked through the contacts list. I dialled a number.

‘Hello? Orlando Stone? You might not remember me, Jamison Willoughby. Yes, that’s right. Hello. Are you still there....? Good. Yes. I need...an asset, or two. Urgently. Good rates. Are you able to oblige?’

I heard scrabbling sounds as if he was searching for a diary, perhaps? He was gone a while before he returned almost panting. ‘Sorry. Got a little tied up. Right. Target? A name?’

Here I hesitated. Although I knew of Stone as a reputable agent, I’d never worked with him before. Nick and Tamm had coerced information out of him regarding The Magician, but he wouldn’t associate me with his ordeal at their hands. The high profile of The Magician might still put him off. Or it might get him to select the best assets he had.

‘The Magician. But this is very urgent and very hush, hush. You understand?’

‘It’s my business to understand. You need assets, one, or two. As it’s urgent, I’m guessing you’ve a location?’ I gave him the full address. ‘Do you have a phone number for that address?’

Puzzled I said, ‘Why?’

‘Knowledge is everything. We may need to contact the house later. After....you know.’

‘Oh. No. Just an address.’

‘I’ll call you back.’

‘When?’

‘Few minutes. I have two men I can contact. I’ll do that then get back. The Magician? Wow!’

I sat back and prepared to wait. I looked at the clock, 21:30.

True to his word he called three minutes later.

‘Bad news, I’m afraid. Both assets out on a sanction already. One not contactable. Look....I’d offer my services, but...well....it’s not really my sort of thing. Sorry I couldn’t help. Good luck. Let me know how it all works out.’

‘You won’t be reading about it in the papers.’ I said with disappointment in my voice.

So it had to be the four of us. It would have to do. The element of surprise was on our side. As well as determination and lethal menace.

And the greed of a Bounty Hunter.

CHAPTER THIRTY

KYLE

I'd been almost three days lying here watching the house. Day and night. It was another night in the woods and I was feeling tired. My energy was getting drained.

My phone vibrated against my breastbone and I picked up the call. Speaking softly in case the sound travelled, I said hello.

'Levy. The cavalry is on its way with the paymaster. Meet with them and decide on a strategy. Is there somewhere safe you can all meet?'

'The farm has a long road that runs from a smaller road, Dawson Lane. I'll meet them there. Give them this number and they can give me a fifteen-minute ETA. How many?'

'Not sure. At least three.'

'And the paymaster, you say?'

'Yes. Look....be careful Kyle. This isn't straightforward.....'

'I know what I'm doing. I get paid to find him, right? I've found him. What more do I need to do?'

'Okay. But I know you, no more hot-headedness. Remember Nottingham....?'

'Yeah, yeah. My only mistake. Keep reminding me. I'll let them take point.' I broke the connection.

Nottingham!

I still feel guilt and remorse about Nottingham. One of the missions I'd rather forget but wake up in the middle of the night dreaming about it. Rarely getting back to sleep again afterwards.

She was certainly a beautiful woman. I never had plans for a family. Never saw myself settling down. But then I'd never met Diana, the Goddess of Love. Her real name was Victoria, but to me, she would always be, Diana.

I could never describe her beauty to anyone, let alone to myself. Her vision haunts me still. Blonde and beautiful with a golden voice. All that was missing was wings and a harp. And a soul, as it turns out.

She was another Bounty Hunter, and after the same quarry as me. She subverted me and used her sensuality and feminism to outwit me. I've never been so...mad. I literally saw red, the red mist they call it. Red blood I saw. I don't know *how* it happened and can never *recall* what happened. I awake at nights just missing the scene *when* it happened. I'll never know what happened.

If I'm ever near Nottingham, which is infrequently, I visit her grave. I can always find it, it's engraved in my memory. It's a small tree, amongst so many others in the forest. She has Robin Hood and his merry men for company in the afterlife.

But I do miss her. Almost every day.

An hour later I saw lights coming up the road to the farm. A car, a large BMW. They were early, in the wrong position and hadn't contacted me. Fucking amateurs!

It stopped at the gate and nothing seemed to happen. I zoomed my binoculars and saw a security box on a post. The driver was talking into the box. Five minutes went by. The car's brake lights came on and it started to reverse. It found a wide part of the track and turned around and drove off. Whoever it was couldn't get into the farm. It couldn't be those I'm waiting for.

I looked at my watch. 22:35.

I was getting fidgety just hanging around here. How long before help arrived? What did I mean by help? They'd be more like a hindrance. Still a couple of hours before they'd get here, at a guess.

I watched the house as the last light went out. They were in bed, only the two of them. That's all I'd seen for three days. Two people asleep in bed. The last light out would be their bedroom. It would be so easy to slip inside and finish the job.

The more that thought rattled around my head, the more attractive it became. I trusted Levy, he'd always paid out without question. But I didn't know these others. Were they to take The Magician out from under me and claim the money, who would the paymaster believe? The paymaster was coming too. Would he try to trick me out of the bounty by saying he was the captor of The Magician, not me? I've heard of trickery like this before. I wasn't about to risk it for myself.

I rummaged around in my portable kit and loaded my flak-jacket pockets with everything I might possibly need. I slipped a silenced 9mm Glock into the holster at the back of my belt. Restraints and Taser gun in the front pockets. My needling kit in right breast pocket. Mobile in my left.

I slipped on my rubber-soled sneakers that were silent yet offered plenty of grip for climbing and running. I slipped a thin balaclava over my head, the thin material prevented it from being too hot, but it still took away the paleness of my skin.

I took a deep breath, reconsidered my course of action and made a decision. Fuck it, was the decision. I slipped from my concealed hiding place and hurried towards the gate.

I heard the nightlife all around me. Howls from somewhere. A hoot of an owl, I think. Screeches and whistles. All loud in the otherwise silence of the countryside.

I reached the gate and pushed along its side fencing, behind the bushes that formed the house boundaries. Once hidden there I easily climbed the fence which wasn't alarmed and slid down the other side. I waited and then made the dash to the front door. This would be locked and alarmed. I edged around the house, unknown territory for me now.

The house was very old and looked to have been a squire's place back in history. A large dwelling, but with many rooms. All small and with fireplaces. That sort of thing. Brick outside and slated roof. Old wooden mullioned windows. If you leant on them they'd collapse.

Everywhere was pitch black. No light anywhere, not even a moon. I felt my way around to the rear and found a small back door. It looked like whoever owned this place hadn't modernised anything. I saw no signs of alarms anywhere. I gently tried the back door handle. It was locked.

I took out my picks and worked on the lock. I heard the tumbler snick back and put on my head torch. I shone the beam through the crack of the door as I slowly opened it. No wires. No terminal pads on the door frame.

I pushed the door open wide enough to let me through but waited in a crouch for five minutes. No sound. No lights coming on. Nothing.

I entered the utility room and looked at the state of the old machines still operational in this room. They were so old. I entered a short hallway and headed towards the main door and lobby.

Stairs led upwards. Old, possibly creaky stairs. I began to climb, very slowly. Testing each step before putting full weight on it. I kept as close to the wall as possible, the centre of a stair will creak more than its edge. It took ten minutes to get to the top.

I oriented myself at the top of the landing and knew the main bedroom was the second door to the right. Directly west. Once again, careful feet against the wall and reached the closed old oak door. I turned out my headlight. With my silenced Glock in my left hand, I slowly turned the door handle with my right. No creaks, as I ever so slowly inched the door open.

I paused. Not for long. Every moment counted now. Silence was essential, but every second that ticked past might mean someone waking up.

In the gloom, my eyes were adjusting rapidly. I saw a double bed and two people in it. I stepped forwards carefully, still aware of creaks. I slipped my gun into its holster and pulled out my needle pack. I selected one syringe and held it ready.

As I neared the first figure in the bed, I could see it was a man. His hair across the pillow, slightly tanned skin. I was two feet away and the

needle pointing towards his neck. Now, or never. I slipped the needle into the skin and pressed the plunger halfway. The second half I wanted to keep for the woman.

Now slightly emboldened by the total lack of noise I'd made, I hurried around the other side of the bed. If she should wake now, I would easily handle her.

I raised the needle and pushed it into her neck.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

TAMM

Nicker sounded drunk.

So I didn't believe him when he said someone had found The Magician. I told him to sober up and hung up.

A minute later he called again. After a round of abusive language, he was empathic. We were to go down and catch him. He told me to call Willoughby to confirm. I've known Nicker for many years. Drunk and sober, the man is not an idiot. So out of years of friendship, I called Willoughby. He was pleased to hear from me.

'I wasn't sure Baker fully understood what I had said. Is he....all right?'

'Sure. He'll be fine. We'll get over as soon as we can. Wait in the lobby, we'll pick you up from outside. Large black BMW.'

I sat and took a moment to think about this. I decided against calling the Colonel. Bad enough he knew we were working with Willoughby without his knowledge. To know we were closing in on The Magician might...well, throw him. There was no knowing how he'd react to that. Tell him when it was all over.

We'd need equipment. I had some in my lock up down the road. I knew Nicker kept some under his bed. I called him and said to be ready in five. I began to load a carryall with what I thought we might need.

Nick was in a bad way. It's no use pouring coffee into drunks, it isn't true. Coffee, tea, or soda drinks don't sober you up any quicker. There's no quick fix to sober anyone up. It takes an hour to oxidise each ounce of alcohol. It has to make its way through the body before the person feels soberer. Time is the only cure, and I had about two hours, water would be the only help.

I pushed Nicker into the passenger seat and hefted his large bag into the boot. I thrust a two-litre bottle of water into his hands and an energy bar. 'Get these down you. I need you sharp, soldier. This mission's important. Especially for you. Understood?'

He nodded and began to gulp the water.

I arrived outside the hotel and Willoughby was standing there. He still wore the old tweed suit and polished black shoes. It was like a uniform to him. He climbed in the back and told me the address. I tapped it into the sat nav and pulled out into traffic.

‘Is he okay?’ Willoughby asked quietly. Nicker was sleeping in the front seat. The water and bar had gone, it was all we could do for now.

‘He’ll be fine. Relax. We’ll be a few hours.’

‘I need to make contact with the man already there. Let me know when we’re fifteen minutes out, Tamm. Okay?’

‘Yes, sir.’ I said with a slight smile on my face. This man would never make an officer, not even a good private in the army. My “sir” was my way of saying he should take a back seat and leave this to the professionals.

‘Who’s the man on the ground....sir?’

‘A man named, Kyle.’

‘He found The Magician, you say?’

‘Yes, he did. My lawyer uses him a lot. Capable chap, apparently.’

‘We’ll see about that.’ I concentrated on the road and drove as quickly as I could.

We stopped once, so Nicker could get rid of the two litres of water. I gave him another bottle as he got in the car and told him to drink it all.

It was getting near midnight and the roads were light of traffic. I looked behind and could see Willoughby dozing in the seat, his head lolling, held up by the seat belts. ‘Fifteen minutes.’ I said quietly. He was instantly awake and made a call on his mobile.

‘Is that, Kyle? This is Jamison Willoughby, Levy mentioned me? Good. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes. We’re meeting you at the end of.....what! What! Do NOTHING. You hear. Jesus Christ! Look...do nothing....okay, okay. But nothing else. Please. You were not supposed.....all right. We’ll drive straight up to the house. See you there.’

Willoughby looked shocked.

‘What?’ came from Nicker who was now wide awake. Army training taught us how to go to sleep at any time and be wide awake instantly.

‘The bastard’s only gone and caught The Magician. In his own home!’

‘Killed him?’ Nicker said quickly, leaning back over the front seat to see Willoughby’s face.

‘No. Fortunately. He’s drugged him and his wife. He’s waiting for us.’

‘Thank God that’s all he’s done.’ said Nicker. ‘I want the pleasure of killing him.’

‘You’ll do nothing of the sort, Baker.’ Willoughby said strongly. ‘Your bonus depends on you doing what I say. This is a mission and I’m in command. Do ONLY what I say. Understood?’

‘Yes, sir.’ From Nicker, very quietly.

I looked at Nicker’s face and knew I’d have to watch him. He was not happy.

The gates to the farmhouse were wide open as I skidded to a stop on the gravel. The front door was open and a hall light on. Both Nicker and I ran ahead, weapons drawn.

We heard a voice from upstairs. ‘Up here.’

We bounded up the stairs and saw the only door open with a light inside. We looked cautiously around the door jamb and then stepped inside.

Seated on the edge of the bed with a 9mm silenced Glock hanging loosely in his hand was a middle-aged, slightly overweight man. He was wearing camouflaged clothes and a large multi-pocket flak-jacket, like he’d come hunting for bear, over the top I thought. He smiled as we burst into the room and he waved the gun casually to one of the three chairs in the large bedroom.

Propped up in a chair was The Magician. His bald head gleamed in the light of a bedside lamp. He was wearing striped pyjamas and his head hung onto his chest. He stirred slightly as he heard our entrance.

I heard Willoughby enter quietly behind us and take a slight intake of breath. I turned to see him standing with his hand over his mouth and eyes wide. I pointed at the sleeping man in the chair. Unnecessary as Willoughby’s eyes were fixed on him.

‘Wake him up.’ Willoughby said harshly. ‘I want him awake.’

Kyle slid off the bed and looked at a small wallet he took from his breast pocket. He selected a syringe and went over to the Magician. He slid the needle into an arm and stood back. Kyle leaned forward and pinched the sleeping man’s earlobes and cheeks. The man moaned and flickered his eyes.

‘All yours.’ Kyle said and went to sit back on the bed.

I could hear Nicker breathing heavily behind me as I stepped forward to be between Willoughby and The Magician. This man was a tricky customer, he could be faking. As I got near I realised his hands were behind his back and his ankles were lashed together with plastic handcuffs. He wasn’t going to move at all.

Willoughby grabbed the slack chin and shook the head with it. The eyes slowly came open.

‘Do you know who I am?’ Willoughby said slowly and clearly.

The eyes moved left and right, taking in the rest of the room. He nodded. ‘Pa...pay....paymaster?’

Willoughby looked up at Kyle. ‘What did you give him?’

Kyle waved the wallet in his hands. ‘Stuff I made up myself. He’ll be round soon. Just wait a little.’

Willoughby was too impatient for that. He slapped the face hard, and the eyes shot open.

‘Do you know who I am?’ Willoughby said again slowly and clearly.

The head nodded slowly, and his eyes rolled towards Kyle.

Kyle was smiling. ‘He’s a bit pissed that I caught him so easily. He doesn’t even know who I am.’

‘We don’t either.’ I said.

‘Kyle Wilber. Work for Levy. I’m guessing one of you is Willoughby? There’s a reward too, am I right?’

‘Later.’ Willoughby said, turning back to The Magician. ‘I’m Jamison Willoughby, you bastard. You tried to screw up my life in so many ways. It’s payback time now.’

Willoughby swung the full force of his fist into The Magician’s nose. I heard cartilage crack and blood spurted over Willoughby’s tweed suit. Willoughby held his sore hand and scowled. When you punch someone it has to be right. Never do it unless there’s no other way. It can hurt the finer, more fragile bones in the fist, more than the heavy solid bones of the head.

The Magician began coughing up blood from the damage to his nose as it ran down the back of his throat.

‘Don’t let him choke on his blood. Bend his head forward.’ Kyle said, without moving to help.

I leant forward and forced the head onto the chest and pushed the upper body to bend over the knees, but his hand restraints prevented him from going any further. The coughing slowed, and the blood dripped onto the small rug on the floor.

I turned to Kyle and said, ‘There was a woman?’

He nodded. ‘She wasn’t part of the deal. Was she?’

Willoughby shook his head. ‘So where is she?’ I asked.

Kyle shrugged. ‘I took her downstairs. When you’ve finished in here, he’ll join her.’ He pointed the Glock at the bloodied man. ‘If that’s what you want. No extra charge for clean up.’

Willoughby looked at Kyle and could see what I could see, a completely disinterested look on the man’s face. Money was the only motivation with this man. If we hadn’t got here, he’d calmly cut off the head and send it back on a silver platter, with a bill for his services.

Willoughby nodded.

Three loud reports sounded and startled all of us. I turned to see Nicker standing over the Magician, his 1911 smoking in his hand.

‘For Christ’s sake....’ Willoughby shouted.

‘Nicker?’ I said, slightly calmer. ‘What’ve you done?’

One slug had almost taken the top off the Magician’s head. The other two had gone into the heart, a few centimetres apart.

Nick was calm as he said, ‘That’s for Thorny, Chocolate and Boris.’

He fired two more shots into the body. It jerked with the impact at such close range. Our ears were ringing.

‘And that’s for Muddy and Mighty.’ Nicker added. He lowered the gun, and I took it from his hand. I slipped it into my belt and pulled him away. He was unresisting as I led him back out to the car.

I pushed him into the back seat and saw his eyes were glazed over. I looked closely at him and saw a trace of white powder around his nostrils.

‘Oh...Nicker...’ I said softly. ‘Stay here a while and rest. I’ll be right back.’

I ran back into the house and up the stairs. Willoughby was standing over the body and almost crying. Kyle was still on the bed but had put his gun away. There was silence in the room.

‘Shall I dispose of him now?’ Kyle said quietly.

Willoughby visibly pulled himself together and said, ‘Yes, please. Somewhere no one can ever find him.’ He turned and walked out the door.

I looked at Kyle who had now stood up. A dumpy little man. I suppose age and experience make up for a lot of things. ‘Do you need a hand?’ I asked.

He shook his head. The fair hair waving all over his head. Time for a haircut, he could afford one now. ‘I’ve done this many times before.’

He smiled at me and pointed to the door. ‘Is that the man who’s offering the reward?’ I nodded. ‘I’ll take a cheque before he leaves.’

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JAGGER

We were just about to turn in for the night when I heard the gate buzzer sound.

Lucie and I looked at each other.

‘Who could that be?’ she said.

Nothing good will come of this, I thought.

I went out into the hallway, leaving the lights off. Under the hall table, I had a gun stashed, easily ready for use. I looked at the small TV monitor on the wall and saw a black man leaning out of his car window.

Orlando!

I selected the sound only, not wanting to show my face. ‘Hello?’ I said cautiously in a neutral accent.

‘Hi. Don’t know who I’m speaking with, but I’ve an urgent message for someone interested in magic tricks. Can I have a quick word with him?’

I waited.

‘This is urgent. His life is at stake here. Whoever you are, let me talk to him, or convince me you can get a message to him.’

‘What’s so urgent?’ I asked quietly.

‘Look...if you are him, and I hope so...I’ve driven like a madman from London to tell you they are on their way here. Probably...to kill you.’

‘Who are they?’ My voice still calm.

‘Willoughby. That name mean anything to you?’

‘I know of him. What about him?’

‘For Christ’s sake, open this gate. I need to talk to you.’

My mind was racing. Thoughts leapt out at me. How did they find me? How did Orlando find me? They knew where I was! That meant that there could be someone out there right now watching. Was Orlando part of the plan to attack me? If I let Orlando in....?

‘How do you know this?’

‘Willoughby tried to get me to help. Get a few assets together.’

‘And you didn’t?’

‘No. I....well...I hope you’re the Magician, but I owe you. A while ago I told them...well gave Willoughby a description of you. And I guess someone

recognised you and now they know where you are. I'm just trying to tell you in advance, so you can get away.'

I waited a moment, still thinking.

'Who are you?' I said slowly.

'Orlando Stone. I used to work....work with The Magician. He would know me. I guess you can't be him. Can you get a message to him?'

'I will look into it. I think you should drive home now. I'll call you later, Mr.....Stone, and let you know if your fears have been founded. Thank you for your consideration, Mr Stone. Have a safe journey home.' I turned off the intercom.

'What the fuck was that all about?' Lucie said behind me.

'All our fears coming together. They've found us.'

'What do we do?'

'Stick to my plan of action.'

'Which is...?'

I held her close and kissed her gently on the lips. 'This is nothing to worry about. I have all this in hand.'

'Really?'

'Follow me. You can help me with the other residents.'

When I knew that this would be my primary home and I'd be on the run for the rest of my life, I devised a plan. It's often the best defence to let your enemy come to you. You chose the battleground, somewhere you're familiar with and your enemy not. Roman Generals used this tactic a lot and were hugely successful with it. You can funnel the enemy into a kill zone. You have more control over the outcome than they do. Also, the timing is on your side.

I can make my house very secure. I turn on all the alarms, hidden and obvious when we leave the house empty. If I was to be invaded, it would be by stealth at night, or by a sudden force during the day. I was hoping for the night. Orlando had said it was urgent, and it was late at night, so I could only guess it would be tonight.

So the gates were alarmed, and the back door locked. That would be the least they'd expect. I didn't want their suspicions aroused by letting them have an easy entry. If we were being observed for any length of time, they'd have noticed our night-time ritual, so I needed to stick to that. Draw them into the bedroom.

A year ago I had some manikins made, they cost thousands, but what price would anyone put on their own lives? These days they can be realistic

and almost lifelike. The two I had made were similar to our basic shapes, skin tone and natural hair. Lucie's was particularly good. I said to her on several occasions I didn't know why I needed her around when I have the good version. She laughed. Once.

If someone wants to kill you in your bed, they usually make sure it's the right person they're trying to kill. So just stuffing pillows down under the duvet won't work against a professional. Especially if, like me, you want to get up close and personal with the target. And we were talking about a professional here, someone good enough to track me down and find my lair.

Lucie gave me a hand getting the dead-weight manikins out of the cupboard in the bedroom and arranging them in a sleeping position. They're not the same weight as the real thing, but the density of material makes them very heavy. The skin felt real. I could see Lucie staring at me with that, 'not the good Lucie joke again' look.

We spent some time making everything look right. A half empty glass of water on the side stand. Reading glasses and a book on the other. Clothes were thrown over a chair.

I waited until our normal bedtime of ten thirty and turned out the lights. Then I adjusted the blinds to allow just enough light in. I stood in the dark for five minutes just to see what a stranger could see in that light. It showed me that the right place for me to be was in the dark gap between the wardrobe and corner of two walls.

Lucie was silent throughout.

When we finished, I took her by the hands and kissed her slowly and lovingly on the lips.

'Your job is done.'

She shook her head. 'We're in this together.'

'Yes, we are. But the next bit, the bit I'm good at, you're just going to be in my way. So don't argue and go down to our safe room in the basement. Please, Lucie. Sweetie?'

She could see by the look in my eyes I meant it. She could understand by the haste we had to work that time may be important.

'Okay.' She said with a smile she didn't feel. 'I suppose I'm wasting my breath to ask you to be careful?'

I shook my head. 'I'm always careful. You know that. Don't come out of the room tonight unless *I* tell you to.'

She looked away with a stern expression on her face and walked out of the room.

I'd no idea how much time I had, or even if I was wasting these efforts. I just had to wait it out.

I pulled on a pair of my specially made thin rubber gloves. These gave me full sensitivity in my fingers but left no fingerprints or DNA. Although my house was saturated in my DNA, I didn't want any on the invaders I intended to eliminate and make an example of.

I stood on the top of the stairs and listened. It was probably about half an hour before I saw a shadow move downstairs. My heart beat faster as I eased back into the bedroom, closed the door quietly and took up my position.

I saw the bedroom door move and slowed my breathing. I was calm and knew all I had to do was wait for the right moment.

My eyes were fully adjusted to the dark room, and I saw a man enter. No real details, but he was not tall, and he was not slim either. A slightly older man I guessed. An asset?

I watched as he slid his gun in the back of his belt and took out some sort of wallet. I saw the flash of silver in the dim light and realised it was a needle. So that would be his preferred method of assassination.

I watched as he injected the male dummy and moved around quickly to the next. I tensed.

As he bent over the second dummy, I was right behind him. His concentration solely on the easier of the two victims in the room. Two steps put me next to him. I grabbed his hair through the balaclava and pulled it back. His body arched backwards, allowing me to grip his hand with the syringe.

I squeezed and twisted, taking control of his own hand. As I pulled his head further back, it revealed his neck, and I slid in the needle and pushed down the plunger. He went limp very quickly.

I supported his weight and eased him on top of the Lucie dummy.

I didn't know how much time I had. Was this the full force that Orlando had warned me about? He said there were more. Outside now? Coming later?

The old Magician had resurfaced. Things fell into place. I formed a plan but needed time to get it all ready.

I started to undress the limp man, throwing his clothes on the bed so I could see them separately. He was down to his underwear now. I went to my dresser and opened a drawer. I pulled out an old pair of my pyjamas and struggled to get him into them. He was fatter than me and the sleepwear only just stretched to fit.

Lucie would've been useful at this point, but this was not over yet. At any minute I might have people bursting through the door with guns. I moved smoothly, but quickly.

I rolled both dummies out of the bed and pushed them underneath. As long as no one actually looked under the bed, they were well hidden.

Dragging the sleeping form over to a chair, I sat him in it. At this point, I was grateful I'd kept up my fitness regime and was able to lift him on my own.

I looked at his clothes on the bed. I needed to make adjustments if I was going to get away with wearing them. In my wardrobe, I had a series of fat suits I wear as a disguise. I found one I thought looked right and slipped it on. The trousers and shirt now fitted. The flak-jacket I slipped on and began a search of the pockets.

Just as a mobile phone rang.

I dug it out of the pocket and pressed the right button.

'Is that Kyle? This is Jamison Willoughby, Levy mentioned me?'

Willoughby!

'Yeah. Yeah.' I said in a neutral accent. This could get difficult really quickly.

'Good. We'll be there in fifteen minutes. We're meeting you at the end of.....'

I thought fast. I didn't want to meet them anywhere. I dived in with my prepared scenario. 'Don't bother. It's all done.'

'What!'

'I've captured The Magician.'

'What! Do NOTHING. You hear. Jesus Christ! Look...do nothing...'

'He's tied up. Going nowhere.'

'Okay, okay. But nothing else. Please. You were not supposed.....'

'It was an opportune moment, and I took it. Come into the house.'

'All right. We'll drive straight up to the house. See you there.'

They broke the connection. He'd asked if it was Kyle. The possibility therefore that he didn't know Kyle. I was now going to have to rely totally on that. I also knew I had a few more minutes. I turned on a few bedside lamps to give me some more light. Then hurried through the rest of the pockets and found what I was looking for.

A wallet.

Some money. A few business cards which said, Kyle Wilber, “Executive Bounty Hunter”. So that’s what he thought he was. Hence the doping rather than the shooting. They wanted me alive, not dead. I was pleased to find that out.

Driving License for Kyle Wilber. A poor picture, but all I had to work on. In the bottom of my wardrobe, I pulled out a small makeup case. In the top of the wardrobe, I had some wigs, I found one the nearest and slipped it on. Long sandy hair, slightly unruly. I slipped in cheek pads and guessed at the nearest contacts to use. It was the best I could do.

I sat on the bed and looked closely at the small wallet he’d been holding. It had three syringes in little holders, one holder empty. God knows what was in them all. Some lethal - some not, I guessed. I closed the wallet and left it on the bed. I threw the rest of his unused clothes under the bed.

The Glock was on safety and ready to use. His second preferred method of apprehension, I assumed.

I needed him to look like The Magician. The last time Willoughby had seen me, I’d a bald head. It was still bald, but the hair was growing back after I’d shaved it for the Ryce-Hardin mission.

I hurried into the bathroom and grabbed my electric shaver and a few towels. I wrapped the towels round poor ol’ Kyle’s neck and began to shave his head. It takes longer than you think. I tried to hurry but hoped I’d have a minute or two’s warning when they came.

I finished and didn’t take time to admire my work. I rolled the towels up, making sure all the shaved hair was collected and threw them into the laundry basket and the shaver back in the cabinet.

I took the time to use some plastic handcuffs from the flak-jacket pockets to secure the sleeping form to the chair. His hands tied behind him and his feet to the legs.

I saw lights sweep across the ceiling and knew it was game time. I’d know within the first few seconds if this plan was going to work. If not....I had the Glock ready in my hand.

I sat on the bed and waited until I heard them downstairs.

By the time I shouted, ‘Up here.’ I was ready for anything.

The three men that entered I knew very well. The Asian, Tamm and the animal, Baker. Willoughby slithered in after them. They’d all met me too, one way or another.

There was a stunned silence. I studied them all. Tamm, stoic and protective. Baker, on edge and poised. Willoughby, at a loss what to do next.

‘Wake him up. I want him awake.’ Willoughby said.

Working on intuition I picked up the wallet of syringes and pulled one out. I'd no idea what it would do if put in Kyle's bloodstream. So I pretended to line up the needle and with a little sleight of hand, pressed the plunger. I watched the fluid slide past his skin and into the chair back. I returned to the bed as if I didn't care.

My heart rate went up when Kyle was murmuring about the "Paymaster". But drugs can do strange things to the mind. At least Willoughby thought the drugged-up victim recognised him.

I thought someone would ask what happened, and I gave a casual excuse about using pre-prepared drugs. Hell, I was supposed to be a Bounty Hunter. That's what Kyle's business card said.

I added a bit about, 'He's a bit pissed that I caught him so easily. He doesn't even know who I am.'

'We don't either.' Tamm said. I could see his mind was working overtime. He was the only one not assuming the situation was what it seemed. I'd have to watch him carefully.

I remembered Willoughby saying that someone called Levy knew Kyle and had sent Willoughby out to meet Kyle. Levy....I knew that name. I quickly had it. Jacob Levy, Willoughby's celebrity lawyer. He'd been on the TV news for at least a week. Sometimes standing beside large blow-up pictures of my face. Levy! How could I forget him?

'Kyle Wilber. Work for Levy. I'm guessing one of you is Willoughby? There's a reward too, am I right?' I was hoping I'd put the facts together.

Willoughby's dismissive 'Later.' Proved me to be right. Inside, I breathed a sigh of relief.

When questioned about Lucie, I was vague and implied I'd killed her and was ready to dump the body. As an inspirational addition, I suggest I handled the removal of poor ol' Kyle too.

The shots fired by Baker were a surprise to us all. I'd taken my eyes off him and was watching Tamm. I immediately concentrated on Willoughby. He was the decision maker, and it looked like this was not one of his decisions. Baker had the look of a loose cannon. Judging by the look Tamm gave him, this was one of those times.

Bakers' dedication to his dead colleagues was further proof. The next two shots were probably the last nail in Baker's coffin. After that, no one was going to trust him ever again. Right now, I'm sure he didn't care about that.

Tamm hurried Baker away from Willoughby. It took Willoughby a while to register that his nemesis was dead. Gone forever. It was probably what he wanted, but not so quickly. He was trying to come to terms with that. I let him stew a while.

He stood looking over the body and tears were forming in his eyes. Not for sympathy, I'm sure. More....relief. Possibly. It must have been an end of a bad chapter for him. But I'd have thought he really wanted The Magician to be put on trial for the death of Naomi Ryce-Hardin, not him.

He stood that way until I said, 'Well....you wanted to kill him, Mr Willoughby. Now you've done it.'

I held my breath. I wanted a response, but not denial.

'You have no idea what this man has done to me, Kyle.'

'I don't. But it must have been a million pounds' worth of harm.'

'You have no idea.'

'Took a lot of effort to plan and kill this guy, eh? Bet you wanted to pull that trigger more than the other guy? Did you tell him to do that?'

Willoughby had stopped listening. He was standing over the corpse, trying to dry his tears without me seeing.

I wondered how our conversation would sound on his voice recordings. Did I say enough to implicate him? Should I push for more self-incrimination? Before I could make that decision Tamm hurried up the stairs again.

It was time to end this charade. 'Shall I dispose of him now?' I said moving to Willoughby.

'Yes, please. Somewhere no one can ever find him.' He walked away without a backward glance. Tamm was now looking at me. I moved to the body and began to clip apart the restrains.

'Do you need a hand?' Tamm asked.

'I've done this many times before.' I didn't want him getting near the dead guy. I don't think I'd be fooled into thinking this man was a legendary hitman, not looking at the physical condition he was in. I mean, why would The Magician wear a fat suit in bed? This had to be his real body, right?

Fortunately, Tamm wasn't there when I went to the Ryce-Hardin's and so didn't see the real Magician stripped to the underwear. I hoped I'd turned on just enough bedside light for them to see by, but not so much as detail was obvious. He seemed satisfied as he walked away.

I needed one more thing. I hoped this would work too. 'Is that the man who's offering the rewards? I'll take a cheque before he leaves.' I said.

I saw the look of disgust on his face as he walked away. I moved to the window and stood to one side. I gave them all a moment talking by the car before going outside to confront them.

They turned to look at me as I came out the front door. Willoughby had a passive look on his face, Tamm more confrontational. I assumed he'd just told Willoughby my request. I decided to push the issue.

'I don't know how long I've got before someone comes here. So I need to get started.' I waved to the bedroom upstairs. 'Jacob said you'd pay me the bounty. I can manage a cheque.'

I stared at Willoughby with a no-nonsense stance. I rested my hand on the butt of the gun in my holster, Kyle's holster. I flicked my eyes to Tamm. His gun was holstered, and I saw a twitch in his hand adjusting towards it.

I took my hand off the butt and folded my arms like I wasn't going to move until something happened.

Willoughby sighed and pulled out a chequebook. He rested it on the top of the car and began to write.

'Kyle Wilber. That'll do.' I added with a very small smile.

Willoughby ripped the cheque out of the book and got into the car without looking at me. He gave it to Tamm who held it for a moment, looking at the noughts. I stepped forward with my hand out. He slowly gave it to me.

'Pleasure to be of service.' I said with a larger smile.

I stood and watched as they drove away, their taillights disappearing in the bend of the road. I let out one long sigh before running into the house.

Lucie hugged me and wouldn't let go.

When I eased her off, she looked at what I was wearing and said, 'What the fuck is that you've got on.'

I did a pirouette before saying, 'It's the latest fashion. It's what all fashionably dressed Bounty Hunters are wearing this Autumn. Don't you like it?'

She smiled briefly before asking the question on her mind. 'How did it go?'

I could see the concern on her face. 'As I told you. No problem. Look. A million quid!' I waved the cheque at her.

It impressed her. 'Who died?'

'The bad guy. As usual.'

She thought about this a moment then said, 'So...where exactly has this got us to? What happens next?' She said with a sadness I recognised. 'We've been here before, Jag. How many more times?'

I held up two fingers and said. 'Two more steps. One I need you for.'

‘Christ!’ she said. ‘Now what?’

‘I want you to talk to a lady.’

‘And the other?’

‘I want to capture a snake.’

PART SIX – Endgame
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
SARA

It surprised me, nervously, to receive my two uninvited visitors.

After all this family's recent experiences I checked their documents very carefully. Army personnel. Military Police. Special Services Division. Never heard of that. Peter Simms, no rank. Charlene Young, no rank. Photos matched. I handed the wallets back. I stood and waited by the door for their reason to visit.

Charlene spoke first. 'Sorry to disturb you, Mrs Ryce-Hardin, but we've come about your husband, Colonel Charles Ryce-Hardin.'

I waited.

There was silence. They assumed I'd be worried, panic, or get overly inquisitive. I wasn't any of those things. I looked at the woman. Very attractive, very severe haircut, jet black hair. Hardly any makeup. Stunning figure in a tight-fitting designer suit.

The man was dressed in a business suit, charcoal grey. Fitted him well. A young man slowly turning to fat. He said, 'We need to ask you a few questions. If you have the time?'

I had the time, but not the inclination.

I waited.

The man spoke again. 'We also have some information we want you to have. You may find it important. Certainly interesting.'

He was all soldier. Crew cut hair, sandy coloured, as were his eyebrows. He was covered in freckles and had the characteristic fair skin of a Scotsman. His accent was obvious Scottish. Edinburgh I would guess.

I was interested but wanted some details. 'Yes?' I said quietly.

Herbert was standing silently by the door having opened it for them. The man looked at him and said, 'The information is for your ears only, Mrs Ryce-Hardin.'

I looked at them both as they stared at me levelly. No loss of eye contact there. I took my time answering. I looked at Herbert and said, 'Show them into the study, Hebert. I will join you shortly.'

'Thank you, ma'am.' The woman said with a lovely smile. Herbert led them into the study and I stood thinking.

They hadn't asked for Charles. He was out, he was always out on a Wednesday morning. Did they know that? How? Who were they really? Too many questions. Answers were in the study, waiting for me. Against my better judgement - I was now curious.

I walked in to see them standing near the desk. The man turned, and he was holding the gun The Magician had given to Charles. My heart beat faster and I didn't know why.

'This is a rare piece, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. Where did Charles pick this up from, do you know?'

'It was a gift. Please put it down.'

I could see a look of surprise in his eyes. Was it the tone of my voice, it was a little harsh. Or did he genuinely want more details? He placed the odious weapon back in its place.

Too many questions I wanted answering. It was my turn. 'What exactly do you want from me?'

They looked at each other and the woman took the lead. 'I'm sure you're aware your husband retired from the service....early.' I nodded, non-committal. 'Do you fully understand the reasons why?'

I knew the official reasons, so I gave them those. 'The army is downsizing. War zones are increasing. The higher the officer the more pay. One way to cut costs....cut the number of highly paid senior officers in all three forces. Everyone knows this.'

'Precisely. But in your husband's case, there were....extenuating circumstances. Did you know any of these? Did the Colonel tell you why he was asked to take early retirement?'

I showed suppressed anger. 'What sort of question is that? My husband's a decorated military officer. Impeccable record....'

'I have to stop you there, ma'am. Not impeccable.' The man looked almost smug.

I looked into his dark eyes and saw no humour, or compassion there. 'How dare you....!'

He pulled out a sheaf of papers from his briefcase. 'It's all here, ma'am. Chapter and verse. The whole of your husband's military records. The good....and the bad.'

I stoically refused to take the papers. I said slowly and clearly, 'What do you want?'

'A little co-operation, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. That's all.' The woman was soft where the man was harsh. Good cop, bad cop. I nodded for her to continue.

She smiled as she said, 'May we sit down. We'll all be more comfortable. Don't you think?'

'Don't patronise me, lady. If you've something to say, say it. I'll have my say, then you can get the hell out of here.' I was beginning to get frustrated and angry at these people. Beating around the bush, implying bad things about Charles.

But we all sat down and let a few moments help to cool the situation. Finally, the man took the lead and said, 'We've a significant amount of information concerning Colonel Ryce-Hardin. His full term in the army and his tours. Latterly...he made some....possibly poor judgment calls. It's come to our notice that there's now a danger...a very real danger, that there could be some criminal charges levelled at him.'

'Preposterous....'

'Ma'am. Don't shoot the messenger. What we have here is hard evidence. What we need to do today is decide what we're going to do with it. That's where you have an input.' His eyes never left mine. He was serious.

That stopped me in my tracks. How was I supposed to process that sort of remark?

He was experienced enough to let me make the next move. I waited as long as I could before saying, 'Go on.'

Charlene said, 'As you've probably guessed by now, Mrs Ryce-Hardin, we're not employed by the army. We are outsourced civilian personnel.'

I nodded. Of course, they weren't the army. They looked army but didn't act army. They would've more sensitivity for a decorated war veteran than to try to besmirch his reputation to his wife.

Simms continued, 'But we've a lot of detail and a report to write. That's our brief, and that's what we're paid to do.'

'Then do it.' I said through thin lips.

They looked at each other again and she said, 'Not as simple as that, Mrs Ryce-Hardin.'

He continued, 'We've evidence that would probably condemn your husband both in a civil and a military court.' He waited for my reaction. There wasn't one. 'To prison, ma'am.'

I pulled myself together and said as calmly as I could, 'So what's stopping you?'

'Well....you, ma'am.' He said quietly.

'Me? How?'

Charlene leaned forward and said, 'You need to understand what this would mean to you and your daughter.'

'What's my daughter got to do with this?' I was at the point of kicking them out the door.

'Everything, ma'am.' She said.

Simms said, 'If we give all our information to the army do you know what they will do? They will strip your husband of all his honours. Take away his pension. They may make him an example. As he's retired, he probably will not go to an army prison.'

Charlene continued, 'If we give this to the civilian police they'll charge him and put him on trial. If found guilty, he'll be sent to prison. The army may then still do all the things I've said, as well.'

I was becoming confused. 'What's this got to do with my daughter?'

They looked at each other again. Was there a secret sign being passed, were they trying to get a point across I was too stupid to understand?

'The army may be able to prove that your house and grounds here were funded by illegal means.' He said waiting for it to sink in with me.

It did. Very quickly. 'I could lose my home?'

'You and your daughter may have very little to live on while he's in prison, ma'am.' Charlene said with sadness in her eyes.

The full horror hit me then. Did I think Charles could have done the things they said? A few months ago I would've said no. But after the revelation of that Magician fellow and now these military police people....?

This was all a little too hard to take in. 'Why're you telling me these options? What do you want me to do?'

Charlene said, 'We're strongly affiliated to the military, ma'am. We don't want to see our own decorated heroes publicly degraded and humiliated. Not good for the service.'

Simms continued, 'We're aware that the Colonel has had some high-profile involvement with Jamison Willoughby. There is the issue with his very public announcement of a bounty for the man Willoughby believes killed your daughter?'

Young quickly continued, 'We believe Willoughby is about to be targeted by the police for a series of criminal offences. If your husband is associated with him....*everything* will come out.'

'He's not associated with him. It's all over. Only just this week, Willoughby said.....'

Simms said quickly, 'Willoughby has all the *previous* charges against him dropped by the police. The main reason being....there are more in the pipeline. Stronger evidence. Recent evidence. We cannot tell you at this stage what, but enough for you to know that Colonel Ryce-Hardin should steer very clear of Mr Willoughby.'

I was getting exasperated now, 'I've just said, he's....'

Charlene tried to smile as she said, 'He should stay clear, along with anyone else associated with the Colonel. Like his army colleagues, Jonny Tamm and Nicholas Baker.'

It was slowly dawning on me what they were now talking about. Charles had been very angry...yesterday. Nick had called him and said....what was it...? They'd captured The Magician. The two of them and Willoughby. Charles was angry that his trusted men had gone behind his back. Against his wishes to pursue the man who'd threatened the whole family if not left alone.

Charles had raved for an hour about this, I'd let a lot of it go over my head. Charles has not been himself lately, anyway. Not since the Magician incident that had severely affected him. I suspected he was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. He was conflicted between loyalty to his family and loyalty to his army team, who he felt a total responsibility towards.

Charles saw their recent actions as a betrayal, although they claimed it was an act of loyalty to him. He couldn't rationalise the two options and come to a satisfying conclusion, not in his present state of mind. Try as I might, he wouldn't listen to me. He locked himself in his study for increasing lengths of time.

Now, this!

I dragged my attention back to this conversation. Trying hard to figure out what they expected me to say or do.

'Tamm and Baker?' I said, giving them the opportunity to develop their argument and me to think of what to say.

'We need to take Tamm and Baker out of the equation. We know your husband has a misguided sense of loyalty to them, but they're now heavily associated with Willoughby. It could come right back on Colonel Ryce-Hardin.'

'What are you asking me to do?'

'Help us take Tamm and Baker out of the equation, to protect your Husband.'

'How am I going to be able to do that?'

Charlene stood up and walked over to me. She handed me a small notebook. She smiled and returned to her seat saying, 'I don't want you to

ask how we got hold of that. We would appreciate if this was never mentioned. In fact, this conversation never happened. I hope you can see the sense in that.'

'What's this?' I asked letting it rest in my hand.

Simms said very quietly, 'Your son's notebook, ma'am.'

The words chilled me. I turned over the battered cover. It was a cheap small little notebook. Something out of W. H. Smiths for less than a pound. I opened it slowly.

It was Justin's handwriting. I started to read, but my eyes were watery.

Simms continued in his quiet way, 'The notebook deals with Justin's last few months and his....career change. More importantly his direct association with Jamison Willoughby.'

It was an arrow through my heart. The man called The Magician had implied the exact thing. We all chose not to believe it, mainly because of Willoughby's vehement denial.

Young spoke quietly and slowly, 'It proves a direct connection between both your children and Willoughby. Your husband had a direct connection with Willoughby too. All plenty of evidence to connect them all. If Willoughby goes down, and he will, he may take your husband with him.'

There was a long silence. I was thinking furiously, unaware that my fingers were stroking the notebook, the last physical contact with my dead son.

'Why didn't you give this to the police?' I said at last.

The two looked at each other again, deciding how much to tell me and the best way.

She spoke, 'Because it does directly connect your children to Willoughby. We'd really like to break all connection, if possible.'

'Isn't this withholding evidence?'

Again that look between them.

Simms said, 'We don't exist, ma'am. So the evidence needn't.'

'Would either of you like some tea or water?' I was playing for time. I needed to think.

Both shook their heads. 'No thanks, ma'am.' He said.

I took a deep breath and said, 'I assume you've some sort of game plan?'

Again that look.

‘Well, ma’am. We’ve come to the conclusion that to proceed with any charges against Colonel Ryce-Hardin would be detrimental to the army service.’

I nodded and said, ‘I agree.’ I tried to disguise the relief in my voice.

‘Of course, you do, ma’am. So to prevent that happening, we’re going to file all these documents and hope they’re never brought to light again.’

I had tears in my eyes as I said, ‘Thank you.’

Charlene said, ‘You may keep the diary if you wish. Although, I advise no one else sees it.’ I nodded.

Simms leaned forward as he said, ‘However, if the Colonel is ever implicated in anything in the future, the army will be obliged to hand over anything they have on the Colonel. Including this information here.’ He tapped the pile of documents on his lap.

From a sense of gratitude, I now felt a sense of dread. ‘I see.’ was all I could say.

Charlene now leaned forward and said, ‘So we’d like to keep your son and daughter out of it, but right now Tamm and Baker are loose cannons.’

Simms added, ‘They’re a direct connection between the Colonel and Willoughby.’

I laughed a nervous laugh as I said, ‘What do you want me to do? Shoot them?’

Again that look between them. Were they considering this? Is that what they wanted? I must have put my hand to my mouth in horror and Young smiled and said, ‘No, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. Not at all.’

Simms said, ‘We’ll do that.’

I felt a shock run up my spine. Did he mean it? I looked at him, he looked like he meant it. He was staring levelly at me, gauging my reaction to the suggestion.

Charlene said, ‘It really depends on your loyalty to your husband, or his ex-troupe, Mrs Ryce-Hardin.’

They did mean it.

‘Simple choice, ma’am. Him, or them? Your daughter and poverty, or a continuation of your current family lifestyle?’

There was no decision to make. But I had a big question. ‘Are you suggesting....murdering them?’

Simms shook his head, ‘Certainly not, ma’am.’ I felt relieved.

Charlene said, 'They'll just disappear from your lives. You need have no connection, no guilt. No knowledge.'

Again a jab of fear. That still meant death, didn't it?

'Would that present a problem to you, ma'am?' I found myself shaking my head. 'We'll re-educate them into army ways. Take them away from the Colonel for a while. Leave all that to us.'

'What will Charles think?'

'Well, ma'am. Perhaps you could just keep him from thinking about them for a while. Make up something plausible. For a while at least, until we can get everything else sorted?'

'Everything else? What do you mean?'

'The real threat to your future, Mrs Ryce-Hardin.' Charlene said. 'Willoughby.'

'How're you going to do that?' I was now nervous again.

'That's where you come in, ma'am.' Peter Simms said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

LUCIE

I didn't want to dwell on my thoughts when I went into our safe room in the house.

Were my nightmares ever going to end? Would we ever be free from these terrible people trying to kill us? As I sat there in the room's silence I just kept imagining what was happening above.

For the first time since I fell in love with Jagger, I doubted my choice of living with him. Could I continue with this level of anxiety? He could smooth talk me with his relaxed words of confidence, 'I've done this before' routine. But could I continue to cope? Right then and there I thought not.

At one stage I thought I heard shots, my heart leapt into my mouth. Almost literally. That's when I decided, NOT. I'd *have* to leave him. I couldn't hold back the tears and I even howled a little. A lot, actually.

I stopped when I realised if I could hear gunshots, perhaps they could hear me wailing. That sobered me up. That's when I realised I was tougher than that. I was still going to leave him, but I was going to be tough when I did it.

As soon as that door opened I was going to tell him. No point in wasting time and draining emotion covering up my decision. When he punched in the keypad and let me out, was the right time. IF he was alive to punch in the password!

Instead, I jumped onto him. Legs around his waist and couldn't stop kissing him. But I didn't cry - that certainly showed him how tough I was.

He told me about what happened, I'm sure he left a lot out. I could see by the disguise he was wearing he'd some major game plan change while it was going on. He wouldn't let me into the bedroom for two days after that. I hated to think what "cleaning up" meant. But he was also busy for a day or two after that.

I got my thoughts together, and we sat down one morning for breakfast and he looked relaxed. Relaxed enough for me to ask my usual question, 'What happens now?'

'I need you to put on a performance.'

I grinned seductively at him and asked, 'And what outfit will I wear?'

He thought a moment before saying, 'Military. No, civilian suit.'

'What the fuck....is a military, civilian suit?'

‘Something business and smart will do. Do you have anything like that?’

‘You know my wardrobe. It hasn’t changed one item since we were married.’ I glared at him to emphasise my point that we never go shopping – for anything. And STILL they found us!

‘I’ll have a look. What character do I play?’

Again some thought. ‘A sympathetic military policewoman.’

‘I can do that. Do I need handcuffs?’ I grinned at him. He wasn’t smiling.

‘What do I get to wear? Some of the clothes in the wardrobe I’d almost forgotten about?’ I mocked anger at him.

‘We need to visit a mother grieving her lost children. We need to persuade her that her husband is about to be put in prison. And most importantly...we need her to do us a favour. No. No handcuffs.’

‘Spoilsport.’ I said as I sashayed out to the kitchen. I stopped, as a thought crossed my mind. ‘People ARE going to think the Magician is dead. Aren’t they?’

‘For a while. Not forever, I’m afraid. I’m surprised they fell for it at all. We still have work to do.’

‘Nothing new, then.’ I said with a sad smile and left him to his thoughts.

In my....past....profession, role play can be an important factor. I believe I’m pretty good at it. Not good enough to go on stage, of course. No formal training, just training on the job, so to speak.

So when we spent hours rehearsing our characters and dialogue and what would happen if she said this or that....it took me by surprise. This was a major movie starring role deal. But it all came down to what we wanted her to do. That was our single purpose. And I think we pulled it off.

I felt sympathy for the woman. I don’t think she was directly implicated in all the trouble Jagger has been having with the Ryce-Hardins. She was certainly a tough old bitch though. She wanted to give us a rough time. But we won her round.

When I looked back on it I realised how complex it all was. The detail we had to invent about ourselves. The rehearsals were vital, I could see that now. Just a look between us could mean the difference between success and failure. Jagger knew his stuff.

Her son’s notebook seemed to be the turning point in her belief in us. I asked Jagger afterwards if it was genuine, or had he faked it. Genuine, he

said. Took it off the body himself. That gave me a chill. Sometimes I forget I'm married to a killer.

In addition to all that, he managed to change a cartridge in the handgun again. Not sure how important that was, but he seemed to think so. We sat down for a few hours and whizzed through the recordings. A lot of talking and nothing seemed relevant. Jagger looked disappointed.

'What were you expecting?' I said.

He shrugged. 'Nothing I suppose. At least...this is good news. I was dreading more involvement with Willoughby. If there was...perhaps we could get an idea of what they were planning.'

He looked at me and smiled. 'Looks like we won't need the gun anymore.'

'So they're not coming after us again?' I said.

He dropped the smile. 'Not the Colonel, but Willoughby might when he realises I'm still alive.'

I thought a moment and looked at him closely. 'So Willoughby's our only target, then?'

He nodded, then added, 'After Baker and Tamm.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ORLANDO

There is a grapevine in my business and I never thought I was really part of it.

I like to be low key, but it's hard when you deal in death. A dramatic way to put it, but the bottom line is just that. I take an order, assign an operative and death is the result. We all get paid and go home. Normally.

The events of the past few months have made me rethink my whole career path. It was not a long think. I'm just no good at anything else. But how could I go on with the thought that my home could be invaded, and my family threatened again? At any time, for any reason.

I always knew this was a dark business, full of dark people. But I was in a position where people always treated me with respect. A certain...reverence. But the Willoughby thugs changed my whole attitude to that.

What they did to me was unforgivable. Every time I think about it I get so....

My redeeming thought is to get even. In some way show those bastards they can't get away with treating people like that. Treating me and my family like that! The casual violence and threats.

Then I relent and realise that I'm a coward at heart. I proved it to them by giving away secrets that were sacrosanct in my profession. That thought alone cut deeper than any knife, or assassins' bullet could. And all they really did was stab me with a pencil!

The remorse I felt resulted in my mad dash to try to save the man known as, The Magician. A man I'd met, used in business even, but never really knew. Pure guilt prompted that stupid action. If Willoughby or his cronies ever found out....?

It was an awesome ordeal that evening. Driving back knowing I'd done my best but frustrated that it wouldn't be enough. I'd told my wife nothing, but she knew something was wrong. I explained my anxious behaviour as a business problem I was fretting over. She's seen me like this before so accepted it. If only she knew that I thought I might put her and my daughter into more danger by my actions....

My nerves were at a breaking point when early the following morning I got a phone call. I didn't recognise the voice it said simply, 'Thank you, Mr Stone. I'm much obliged for the timely warning.'

'I said, you're welcome. How was....everything?'

‘Most satisfactory. But I’d like to know why you took such a risk trying to help my friend, The Magician?’

Friend? Who was he kidding? I took a while to compose my answer. ‘Three reasons. One. I felt I let myself down. I let my family down and let all my business associates down when I gave away sacred information. Two. THEY made me go against every honourable thing I believe in. Three, they kidnapped my wife and daughter to make me do it. Are those reasons enough?’

‘Good enough for my friend, I’m sure.’

‘I will pay youor The Magician, to get them punished.’

‘No need. This one’s on him.’

‘One thing, though. If possible? I want to be there to see justice done.’

I could hardly believe the words that were coming out of my mouth. This wasn’t me. This wasn’t the family man, Orlando.

‘I’ll see what I can do. But there’s one favour you could do for our mutual friend. Not now, but in a few days’ time.’

‘Certainly, if I can.’ I made the promise before once again realising I could be putting myself and my family in danger.

He went on to explain it and I felt another chill down my spine. This wasn’t over. In fact, just beginning. But this time I’d been invited to the party as a host, not an unwanted guest. It was time to join the rumour circuit.

At the time suggested by the man I believe was The Magician, I made the call.

I’d kept the number that the man named Baker had left me. He left me a scar on both sides of my hand too. I still rub it on occasions. But there are some scars you can’t see.

The call went to an answerphone, and I said breathlessly, ‘Orlando Stone. You said to call you if there was a development. There is. It’s urgent. Call me back as soon as you get this.’

I sat back and started to shake. I’m not a player. I don’t do scenarios and acting out for a living. I was nervous. What if the Baker man didn’t believe me?

I’d sent out Carole and Susie shopping for the day. They like Blue Water, so I gave them money and told them to take their time. Like they’d do anything else? But I was assured they were gone all day. Still, I fretted.

I stood and looked out the window, expecting at any moment Baker and the other thug to drive up to my door. I didn’t want that. I’d be out the back door if that happened. To hell with the Magician’s well-laid plans.

When the phone rang I jumped. ‘Stop being a wimp, time to man up’ I told myself. So it was with a genuine trembly voice I answered.

‘What you want?’ I recognised the rough voice and chills started at the memory of his threatening presence in my house. I found I was rubbing my scar again.

‘I’ve information about The Magician. You told me to call you.’

‘What info? He’s dead.’

I took a deep breath and said, ‘No he isn’t. He’s back in business and looking for work. I’ve said I’ve a contract for him and have agreed to meet him in three hours with the details.’

There was a pause at the other end. ‘You sure about this?’

‘Yes. I have met him, remember? I know his voice. He came here to see me. An hour ago. It *was* him. He looked...the same as I last saw him. Just like the sketch you made from my description. It was him.’

‘Where’re you going to meet him?’

I looked at the address I’d been given and repeated it slowly. ‘It’s a disused building, part of a warehouse. What shall I do?’

‘Stay where you are. Do nothing. If he calls back say you’re on your way. We’ll handle this.’

‘What do you mean....?’

‘We’ll handle it.’ The line went dead.

I dropped the receiver into its cradle and watched my hands shake. I sat until it slowed to a slight tremor and hauled myself out of my seat. It was time for me to meet my nemeses and all my fears in one go.

I was terrified.

The building was almost falling down. Huge beams were trying to hold up the roof, but they looked old and incapable of much more support. The front door swung open and inside was the vacant warehouse. Signs of militant occupancy were everywhere. Along with juvenile drawings of male and female anatomy otherwise not seen by the general public.

The large vaulted area echoed to my steps as I moved inside. It was over an hour before the time before the thugs were due here. Still, I felt nervous, turning at every sound.

I heard a click and spun around. There was The Magician, looking as I remembered him from about a year or so earlier. Funny old tweed suit. Overweight ageing man. Scruffy hair, beard and rummy eyes.

'Hi.' I said unnecessarily.

He nodded and pointed to an old tall filing cabinet set against a wall. He motioned me towards it and he walked behind me.

'What happens now?' I said in a whisper. It still echoed slightly around the large room.

'We wait.' The same neutral voice, lacking all emotion.

The wait was stretching my nerves. Several times I started a conversation, and he held his finger to his lips. After a while, I just stood and shook quietly with my own darkening thoughts. I could feel the anger returning. Like it had built up after Baker had left. After my wife and daughter had returned. After I fully realised what might have unfolded. Unreasoned anger but justified all the same.

I wanted so much to see the Magician punish these two if that was his plan. He didn't say what we were supposed to do. I should've asked him. I was about to when he held up his hand and pointed to the rear of the warehouse.

From where we were hidden, we could see the whole expanse of the room. The Magician had obviously carefully chosen this vantage point. I hadn't heard or seen anything, but he clearly had. In the blink of an eye, there was a gun in his hand. A large black thing with a long silencer on the barrel.

He looked at me and winked. His dull eyes almost sparkling. He pointed to the front door and then to the back of the warehouse. They were coming in from both entrances. Just the two of them, or would Willoughby be around too? Could there be more? The thought struck another kind of horror through me. What if I didn't live through this? My wife and child.....

What was I doing here.....!

I saw a movement by the front door, but the Magician's eyes were watching the rear door. He seemed calm and still while I froze in terror. You see these creepy moments on movies and such. But to actually be part of it was not entertainment.

I could just see Baker moving into the warehouse by the front door. His hands were empty, and he walked slowly and almost casually forward. Even I could see he was the decoy, to flush out any attackers lying in wait.

The Magician was not watching him, but a shadow that edged around the wall to creep up on our position. They too could see this was the obvious place to set an ambush. Still, we waited. Neither of the two men could see us yet, but pretty soon one would. Was that what the Magician was waiting for?

Time ticked on in the silence. No one made any noise. I thought my breathing must sound like thunder in the silence. I tried to slow it down but only got more breathless.

Just seconds now before the second man would come around a corner and see us. I tensed, even more than I thought I was already. Baker now standing in the centre of the room, his hands held lightly by his side. The Magician still hadn't looked directly at him. For him, the danger was the other side.

Was this the man who kidnapped and terrorised my family? I wanted to see this man. I wanted to...I didn't know what I was capable of doing. But I wanted The Magician to do it for me. I so wanted this to end quickly now. I felt I couldn't hold my breath, or nerves anymore. How could the man next to me be so calm?

A flicker of movement and suddenly two very soft plops sounded. Quickly followed by two more. A sharp cry of pain came from Baker who was suddenly lying on the ground, writhing in agony and holding both knees. I was only vaguely aware that without my time at the gun range, even those soft gunshots would've terrified me.

I turned to see another man lying full length and very still. He'd come around the corner and The Magician had shot him. Two quick shots. I could see the blood already pooling under his body. A gun lay just out of his reach. He'd been ready to use it, but the Magician was quicker off the mark. More prepared.

I don't know what I felt about the man's death. I felt nothing immediately. The agonised cries of the other man on the floor drew away my concentration.

The Magician was already beside him, ripping a gun away from the man's hand and quickly searching for more weapons. He seemed satisfied and stood back, weapon still pointing at the man's head.

Tentatively I moved forwards after he motioned me to join him.

'Is this the man who came to your house?' The Magician said. I nodded. 'Then that's the man that held your family prisoner.' He said waving the gun at the dead man.

Baker had stopped screaming and was groaning, 'Get me a doctor. Hospital. Anything. Bastard. Fucking, bastard!'

I found I'd no sympathy for the pain the man was suffering. He wouldn't think twice about causing me that kind of agony. Or my family. I stepped forward, unsure what I wanted to do. I felt a tap on my arm and turned to see the Magician was offering me his gun to finish Baker off.

I looked into his unblinking eyes. He said nothing, but I suddenly realised that this whole thing was for me. He'd planned it around *me*. This

was my justice moment. Here was my chance to get even with the evil bastards that had attacked me. I found myself wondering if the Magician had shot one man deliberately to leave me with the other. Took out the real threat and let me finish the job. Was this his twisted way of thanking me for the advance warning I gave him?

He pushed the gun toward me again. His eyes steady on mine. If I refused he'd do the job for me, this I was certain of. Is that what I wanted? To be responsible for this man's death? Could I live with that? Could I live with letting him live?

I shook my head, and he dropped the gun to his side. 'No, I can't shoot a human being in cold blood.' I said.

I felt the surge then. The rage and anger of many a restless night. In my dreams I'd dreamt of this moment and what I would do. Would I carry out my dream, or buckle like a coward? I reached into my top pocket and took out two objects. I stepped forward to look Baker in the eye. He looked fearfully at me. His eyes were unfocused.

'But you're *not* a human being.' I said and stuck a pencil firmly into his left eye. I felt the soft entry, the slight resistance and the soft pop as it broke through. I pressed harder, into the brain.

The scream was short lived as his body went limp.

'For my wife.' I said.

As he slumped flat on the ground I leant over with another pencil, for the other eye. 'For my kid.' I said through streaming tears.

Once again I drove the point deep into his already dead brain.

I never thought I'd ever kill anyone. Never thought I'd pull a trigger. But the pencils are just as effective as a bullet.

The Magician said, 'The pencil is mightier than the gun.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

SARA

The visit from the military representatives was still echoing around in my mind.

It seemed to me that my whole world was crashing around my shoulders. Everything I believed was solid - was built on sand and mud. I thought my children were normal kids. But they turned out to be sadistic and vicious killers. My husband is an honourable and highly decorated military officer. Now he looks like he was a common criminal and heading for a common criminal's fate in prison. While my daughter and I were likely to lose everything and spend the rest of our lives in poverty.

It also seemed that Jamison Willoughby was part of all that. Still part of the problem and therefore a potential part of the cure.

Did I believe everything Simms and Young said? Not initially. But the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. All the facts fit. How can a rational person, who I believe I still am, not believe what they said?

If what they said was true, then the olive branch they held out must be true as well. At least I hoped it was. If I was to have any say in protecting my family, I needed to follow their advice. They had a plan that seemed genuine and practical. I'd nothing to lose by going along with it. Possibly everything to lose by not.

So I made the call and arranged a time to visit.

As the time grew nearer I began to fret, then panic and then decided to call it off when the doorbell rang. It seemed an interminable time before Herbert discretely knocked on the door before opening it. He announced the arrival of Jamison Willoughby.

I know Charles disliked Willoughby and detested the poor quality of his ragged suit. But Willoughby still wore it, despite the reinstatement of his fortunes. It looked even more stained and dirtier than before. It seemed odd to me, but then the man was an oddity, anyway.

I smiled and offered refreshments and a seat. He accepted the seat. I don't think I've ever seen Jamison eat, or drink in our presence. He reminded me of Dracula in that respect. I must look for the pointed teeth next time he smiled, which was rarely.

I'd been briefed in great detail with regard what to say and what to do. We had an endgame in mind and I needed to do my part properly to reach it. I felt the pressure but kept the thought of Samantha in ragged clothing to sustain me through the next hour.

I had on a broach I would never dream of wearing normally, but it had a delicate microphone in it, through which Simms could hear our every word. I could then, through an earpiece, hear any instructions he thought might help with my sales pitch. My long hair hid it from sight. A sales pitch Simms had called it and I saw no reason to disagree with that description.

Willoughby sat silently, waiting for me to tell him why I wanted him to call. I took a deep mental breath and began with a pack of lies I felt no guilt about telling.

‘I just wanted to tell you how much both Charles and I appreciate what you’ve done for us.’

He seemed bemused and shrugged his shoulders before saying, ‘What have I done for you?’

I tried to remember the phrase I needed to say. ‘Why, for killing the man who killed our children. You did kill him, didn’t you?’

Willoughby looked suitably humble and raised his hands in a ‘Well....’ gesture.

I had to try harder. ‘Are you saying I’m showing gratitude to the wrong man? Did you kill The Magician, or not?’

He took a while to think before saying, ‘I suppose I did.’

‘Suppose?’ I couldn’t push much harder. I allowed my eyes to drop and along with them my head. My shoulders slumped. I’m not an actress, I hoped it would do.

‘Yes, I did. Of course. I’m glad it’s made you....happier.’

I think I felt more relieved at his admission than he did. If he was recording also, he’d probably edit that bit out, anyway.

‘How did you find out about....The Magician?’ his question came out of the blue at me. I paused as if in thought, then repeated the words that were flowing into my ear.

‘Someone called. A man called...Michigan. Something Michigan. Said he knew you.’

‘Did he....say anything else? Anything of interest...?’

‘He said a few things I didn’t understand.’

‘Perhaps I can help?’

‘Well...he mentioned you several times. Questioned me about how long I’d known you. Things you said while you were staying here. There was very little I could tell him, was there?’

Simms was also whispering how good I was doing. I felt some pride in that, but not proud of the deception I'd embroiled myself in. I kept thinking of the future of my family and ploughed on.

'Of course. Anything else?' Willoughby probed.

'Oh, yes. He said that the police were looking at you from a different point of view now. He said something...about you....I did get a little confused. Something...about digital. Digital database. Oh, yes....something about a database of digital recordings you had.'

I watched his eyes and saw the reaction. It had hit home as Peter Simms said it might. All those years of hosting with Charles and being part of his social duties in the army taught me how to read people's reactions. Willoughby was shocked.

'He then lost me with something about a subpoena to take possession? Does that sound right? Some bank, or other. Hornes, was it? I don't know!'

Again the pupils contracted, and the lips formed a straight line. He even turned away briefly to hide his reaction. Simms had been right.

His voice had gone quiet as he said, 'Did he say anything else?'

'No. Don't think so. As I say, he was saying things I didn't understand and acting like I should. Strange man.'

Simms gave me a prompt.

'Oh....he gave me this. How could I forget....?' I picked up Justin's notebook from the desk and placed both hands tenderly around it.

'What is it?' Willoughby said, turning his head back to look at me.

'He SAID it was Justin's notebook.' Again the eyes widened, and Willoughby lost some colour in his face. 'I didn't believe him, of course. But I looked at the handwriting and....I think it's his. Didn't that Magician fellow mention something when he was here about a notebook? Do you remember, Jamison?'

Willoughby remembered all right. He couldn't take his eyes off it. Willoughby wanted it so very badly now.

'I don't feel I could read my son's last words yet. The emotion is still too new andwell, raw, I suppose.'

'Yes. Yes, of course. It must be very difficult for you. Perhaps....I could take a look at it for you. Flick through it to see if there's anything you should know. Perhaps....protect you from the more emotional points. Until you feel ready to read it all. I'm quite willing to help you out there, Mrs Ryce-Hardin.'

'Thank you, Jamison. Don't worry. I'll be fine with it.' I clutched it nearer my breast, hoping I wasn't being over melodramatic.

I could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. Eventually, he said, 'There may be some references in there to the Magician. I think it would be good to know about any connection there, don't you think?'

'But the Magician's dead. Nothing matters anymore.'

More wheels turning.

'I still would like to borrow that for a while if I may. Who knows what information might be useful in there.'

I appeared to hesitate. When he said borrow, he meant steal and destroy.

I sighed. 'Michigan said this was a most valuable piece of literature. Not sure what he meant by that. I suppose as a mother it is irreplaceable.'

'I will look after it with my life, Mrs Ryce-Hardin. I promise.'

I had to reluctantly let go of my son's legacy. So I drew out the handing over as long as possible.

'Let it go.' Came the soft comment from Simms. Then a further prompt. 'As further proof of my gratitude, Jamison, should you have any.....material that you need a secure haven, please feel free to use our family safe?'

Say yes and I'll have something of yours Simms wants, I said to myself.

Willoughby looked a little disoriented. He was clutching the notebook tightly to his breast now. 'What?'

'I'm offering the use of our safe in the study here, in case you need tohide something of value?'

'Oh, yes, well....thank you. I will...certainly think about that. But I really must be getting.....'

Once he had the notebook in his hands he couldn't get away fast enough. His goodbyes were curt and insincere. I was glad to see the back of him as he was to see the end of me.

As Herbert closed the front door behind him I sat down and gave a long sigh of relief.

The voice in my ear said, 'Dame Judy Dench had better watch out. There's a new diva on the block.'

It made me smile until I realised that Judy Dench was a lot older than me!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

WILLOUGHBY

My heart was racing as I left Sara Ryce-Hardin.

I hurried down the drive, fearful she'd call me back at any moment to change her mind. I reached the end of the long drive and turned into the road. Thankfully, the taxi had waited as instructed and I hurried inside.

The trip back to the hotel was a blur to me. I was flicking through the pages of the hand-written notebook. Looking for my name in damning circumstances. It was there!

The stupid bastard boy had written down everything. His instructions from me, details of the Hungarian family and the journey plans. The use of the Brethren aircraft. How much he was to be paid and the inclusion of his twin sister into all the plans.

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

I'd been so close to getting caught out. All my careful planning had almost collapsed because of this stupid book. I wanted to burn it and get rid of it for good. But I read it again.

The boy was quite insightful. Obviously well educated, but his revelations about his journey towards an assassin were very interesting. He detailed the people he'd met, conversations with influential people. Telephone numbers and emails. Lots of valuable details for a man like me who collected those sorts of things.

I sat back to let my whirling mind settle down. A dark and disturbing thought crept in. What did she say....about the police and a subpoena for Hornes?

I leant forward and told the driver to take me to The Strand instead. I needed to get my retirement project to a better and safer place. Who would've thought a Horne's safe deposit box was no longer a safe place to hide the family jewels? As a small and independent bank, they specialised in a particular class of clientele. No riff-raff with a £100 in the deposit account allowed in here. You can add half a dozen noughts on that before they'll talk to you.

If the police are after me now, they must know about my collection. But how? I'm the only one that knows I've recorded every important conversation I've ever had. If they know that much, they may be watching me all the time from now on. So where could I put my database? Think!

The hotel safe might be subpoenaed. Even the Ryce-Hardin's safe could be subpoenaed as there is a past connection. The only safe place was

to keep it with me at all times. Along with the notebook. If I lose those items, I would be sunk.

I thought I might get Tamm and Baker as bodyguards. But their performance recently has been....disappointing. I haven't heard from them for a day or two. I'm surprised they haven't been shouting for their payment.

As we entered the busy streets of London, I became more and more paranoid. I was looking behind for police cars following me. I couldn't see any, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

Then another thought struck me. What if I was too late? What if they'd found out about Hornes, been there and served the subpoena? My heart was racing, and I was urging the driver to get a move on through the treacle of London traffic.

He pulled into the curb on a double yellow and I said to wait. He said he couldn't but would circle back for me. It would have to do. I'm a regular client and a big tipper. I ran inside and tried to calm myself. If I was being watched, it was possible they would arrest me as I left. Red-handed so to speak. But if they'd opened the safe it was the same thing, I couldn't deny possession. Do I risk it?

I asked to see the assistant manager, Patrick O'Hare. He was a long-standing friend of mine. I'd put a lot of money through his bank over the years and he'd personally profited greatly along with me. He was not only on site but delighted to see me.

O'Hare was an oddity in every way. He was very short, and I think he had a slight curvature of the spine, as he appeared permanently bent forward. He had receding hair that still retained the "widow's peak" at his forehead. Old fashioned tortoise shelled NHS spectacle frames. His eyes small and difficult to read. The largest hands I've ever seen.

We went into his office and my eyes were looking around to see who was watching me. Paranoia again. He closed the door and we could talk freely. He expressed his delight that my account was no longer frozen. Then, took great pleasure in telling me the charges he was going to make for the small adjustment of the figures before the police were able to freeze it. A small reserve fund was always available to me and I was pleased that my term of isolation wasn't long enough for me to have to use it.

O'Hare was a remarkable man. He held a high position within the bank and yet was not the typical employee. He was a true wheeler-dealer and not just in stocks and shares. O'Hare manipulated money around the world like you wouldn't believe. I didn't know where half of my money was, but then neither did the Inland Revenue or other concerned governmental authorities. I felt I could trust him. Mainly because I'd had evidence of one or two of his less...savoury deals and he was permanently obliged to me for

keeping that all quiet. If only he knew that the evidence was only a few yards from where we sat, he could've retrieved it himself.

I'd offered him a position on the Board of The Brethren. O'Hare was hesitating to take it when the whole board was wiped out by the Magician. He was thankful he hadn't jumped into the offer. He was certainly someone I wanted to include in any future plans I had.

'How can I help you today, Mr Willoughby?'

Translated to mean, 'How can we help each other today?'

'I need access to my security box, Patrick.'

I saw his eyes narrow. 'Something the matter, Jamison?'

The use of my first name was always a surprise to me. I rarely introduced myself by it. So when it was said back to me it usually meant a concern or surprise in the speaker.

'Nothing. I just wanted to check something. Can we go now? I have an appointment looming large on the horizon.'

I gave a rare smile, and he eased his chair back slowly. 'Of course.'

He left me alone in a small room with my box. My hands were sweating as I tapped in the entry code on the keypad. He'd said nothing about a subpoena which he would have if there'd been one. He certainly didn't act like there'd been one. I held my breath as I lifted the lid.

I gave a sigh of relief to see the black box sitting there. Innocuous to what it contained. Innocent in appearance, yet the problems its release might cause. My single most valuable asset. More precious than any property, or investments I'd owned over the years. More important than any yet to come.

Knowledge is power, and power is everything. But what to do with it? Clearly now I couldn't leave it here. That was a decision almost made for me.

I lifted it out. It was the size of a small hardback book or large paperback. I slipped it into my jacket pocket and felt its weight drag the coat down by one side. I slipped the notebook in the other, but it was lightweight and didn't help balance. I'd adjust that all later. I needed to get away to some sanctuary for now.

I locked up the box and slid it back into its receptacle as Patrick returned.

'All okay, Jamison?'

'Couldn't be better.' I said trying to support the dragging weight by resting my hand under the box and lifting ever so slightly. It looked a little unnatural, but better than my coat hanging obviously to one side on the way out and not on the way in.

I said a hurried goodbye and was aware O'Hare was scrutinising me as I left. Had the box been subpoenaed and been copied? Left in its place to make me think it hadn't? Paranoia again?

I caught the taxi on its next circuit and asked if he knew of any good luggage shops in the area. He did, and we stopped off for fifteen minutes. By the time I'd arrived at Colonial Hotel, Holborn, I was carrying a state-of-the-art briefcase, with two lots of security measures. The hard drive and notebook locked securely inside and bundled up like a newborn. I was beginning to feel better.

Not being a flamboyant man, I like to keep things simple. I don't like to have much change in my life. Hence the imprisonment and all my estate frozen was particularly hard. Losing a wife was difficult for me, but now I'm getting used to being without anyone telling me how I should spend time during the day – I like it.

I don't like change in my life but enjoy changing the lives of others.

I'm very fond of the tweed suit Charles hates so much. Fond because it has my recording device all wired into it. But....it's time for a new one. I'll get my tailor to visit my hotel room soon.

I had a relaxing supper and kept glancing at the black leather case lying on my bed. I'd made up my mind it would never leave my side. I'd take it everywhere with me and put itin the wardrobe, while I was in my suite.

For many years now I've made a study of crime and the criminal mind. Al Capone and the Mafia, never fully realising where they went wrong. The world's changing. Time for a very modern approach to crime.

The police adopt new ideas and technology to keep up, so the criminal fraternity has to do the same to stay ahead. With modern methods of psychology, hi-tech equipment. Forensics and profiling. Databases and surveillance techniques. Information. It's all about gathering information.

Knowledge is power, and power is everything.

I pushed the tray away and looked again at the case. Was there enough in there to start my new project? Yes, more than enough. I took a hotel pad and pen and started to draw a diagram. A structure of a new organisation. A new force in the community.

Based on the wonderful principle of The Brethren. Same idea, a different approach, more safeguards added. I would take the same elevated position and control things down through the levels. I would remain as invisible as possible, so I needed a titular head to be the focal point of any media or legal interest. That would be the key appointment. I had three candidates, none knew yet of their impending destiny. Their secret information on my hard drive, a tool for their persuasion.

I felt the old fire inside me again. I'd been stopped before, I should be dead but wasn't. I felt I had a destiny, and I was certainly going to fulfil it to the maximum this time. With no Magician to scupper my plans, no evidence for the police to continue to chase me down.

As long as I was careful and planned well ahead, I should achieve the impossible. Something even Al Capone never fully realised.

I would become the underworld boss of London that nobody knew existed!

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

LUCIE

Jagger told me about Baker and Tamm.

Not straight away, of course. No point in breaking the habits of a lifetime, even for your own wife! He didn't give much detail, but still, I felt cold, then ill. So much violence. How could he do it?

He told me about this Orlando guy, never heard of him before. Then Jagger said he was the guy that tipped us off the other day. We were clearing away dinner, and I looked at what was left on his plate. He ate so little. Only nutritious food usually. Nothing self-indulgent. I said, 'You *sure* you're retired?'

'Of course. Why?'

'You on a diet, or something? Why don't you eat like normal men?'

'Since when have you thought of me as a normal man?' he said with a grin.

It was true. How could I consider how we live as normal? I began to question what WAS normal for me? Normal was me in a nice flat doing a job I came to love. No...love is not the right word...accept. I'd accepted my lot in life, as it were. Okay...granted....Jagger had helped there. Getting rid of Rico made a big difference. Big, big, difference. I dread to think where I'd be now if it wasn't for that intervention. Dread it.

But...even that wasn't normal, was it? Being a call girl isn't normal! But neither is your husband being a mass murderer, either. A hunter-killer. Able to shoot people and walk away unscathed. Physically, or mentally.

So what do I want my life to be before I can call it normal?

I hadn't a clue.

'Something troubling you, Luce?' I could see the intensity in his eyes. He was analysing me. He promised not to do that, he's too good at it. A few seconds longer and I'd believe he was reading my mind.

'Nothing new.' I said with a fake smile. He knows what I think, what I worry about. He's tried to adjust to my needs, but events have overtaken us.

Keep on overtaking us.

I looked at him and felt the sting behind my eyes, this was a familiar feeling of late. 'We're going to have to move, aren't we?'

'It would be the wisest thing to do. Don't you think?' The face expressionless, giving nothing away. Giving me nothing to work on, argue against. Rant about.

Since when did what I think became part of his overall plan for us? It was a pointless question that had to be asked. ‘Why?’

‘People know where we live now. Willoughby, for sure, he’s been here. Levy, the lawyer, most probably, as his hired gun found us. Who knows how many they each told. How many people out there still think the bounty is payable?’

‘Get Willoughby to announce your death. Call off the bounty. Anything!’

‘Willoughby can’t admit he *knows* The Magician is dead. How would he explain that to the police? And they’re going to ask that question and a few more no doubt. Call it off, maybe, he should do really. But he needs a good public excuse.’

‘If they think you’re dead, why are you bothering with them?’

‘They could soon discover the truth. Levy will get suspicious first, then talk to Willoughby. Descriptions, Kyle’s voice, attitude. Soon put two and two together. The cheque not cashed. Too risky. It’s bought us time, that’s all.’

‘Couldn’t you ...persuade Levy to call it off?’

‘As the Magician? No. I’m dead remember? I want to stay dead as long as possible.’

‘What if...what if Tamm and Baker told Willoughby about...you know Orlando whatshisname before you both....killed them?’

‘Even more reason to allow the bounty to stand if Willoughby thinks I’m still alive.’

I was not holding the tears back now. Couldn’t. Didn’t have the strength.

He moved behind me and encircled me with his arms. I felt him kiss the top of my head. One thing at least was normal, his love for me.

‘Willoughby is the last obstacle now. We do need to move away from here. But only until we can sort Willoughby out for good.’

I nodded, not agreeing, just accepting. ‘How long do you think?’ I waited for the fudging and talking around the subject. I expect pacification, a display of confidence in his undoubted abilities to put things right.

‘One week.’ His voice was firm and decisive.

‘How can you be sure?’

He walked around and knelt in front of me. He took both hands as if a proposal was coming. In a way it was.

‘Two reasons. One. I have a plan.’

‘A survival strategy?’ He nodded and paused. I had to ask, ‘Two?’

‘I need your help again.’

I felt the pang of fear. Another emotion that was more prevalent recently. Now, what danger were we heading into together? I did not want this. It was not....normal!

‘How?’ I said as calmly as I could, I dare not risk more words unless I said what I really felt and that would hurt us both.

‘Nothing you can’t do. Nothing you haven’t done before. Nothing that would put you in any danger.’

I gave an involuntary laugh as I said, ‘But nothing you could do yourself?’

He smiled and squeezed my hands. ‘I could. But it’s going to be quicker and more effective coming from you.’

That didn’t calm my fears, but it did allow me to squeeze his hands in return. He kissed me gently, then with more passion. That felt more normal.

In the few days since the Tamm, Baker and Orlando incident, about which I still know little detail, Jagger had been absent. He was hunting. I now recognised all the signs. Complete secrecy on his part. If I ask him where’s he has been, “Research” would be the most common answer.

His “out” could be for an hour, or overnight. Overnight, he’d tell me in advance. He would see my eyes reflecting concern and ...yes...sometimes fear for his safety. I can rationalise at times that his safety should not be an issue. If there’s one man in this world of mine I know can look after himself, it’s Jagger Gilchrist. My husband.

I knew instantly when the research was over, and the mission began. He paid more attention to me.

We lay in bed one morning after a session that left us both breathless. Me less than him, but as a good wife should, I allowed him to think the best of his performance. Never adventurous, always steady and reliable. Summed him up exactly.

I knew what was coming, so I decided to show off a little and said very quietly, ‘So what do I have to do then?’

He turned and leant on his elbow and looked at me. ‘Do?’

‘Yeah, “Do”. You said a while ago I’d have to help you with the Willoughby thingy. So...what do I have to do?’

His smile was genuine, and I think I’d surprised him by bringing up a subject he was dreading raising.

‘Well....’ he lay back, I slid my head onto his chest and looked up at his face. Waiting to spot the hesitation, the withholding of the dangerous parts. In short, the pack of lies that was about to begin.

‘Willoughby’s made his nest in the Colonial Hotel, in Holborn. Suite 309. Nice setup. Master bedroom, lounge area and a large bathroom. Small balcony and full service.’

‘Good for him.’ I said, trying to keep the mood light while watching Jagger’s eyes. So far it was the truth.

‘Indeed. Rarely leaves, but when he does, he takes a briefcase with him, everywhere. Like this.’ He swung gracefully out of bed allowing my head to drop onto the mattress. He opened his wardrobe door and pulled out a shiny black, expensive looking leather briefcase.

‘A Parkinson Richards, Platinum Executive Document Security Case. Exactly like this. Eight hundred quid of ego safe.’

‘Nice. Why do you have one too?’

‘Because we need to swap this for his.’

He returned to the bed and lay down. I put my head back on his chest and tried the gauge the length of silence to judge its importance. I had to respond eventually, ‘By we, you mean me. Right?’

‘Wrong. I will swap the case, but I need you....to set it all up for me.’

It sounded simple, ‘You will set it up for me’. Sneaky conniving bastard, husband! I was to become a whore again.

That’s not true, actually, but at first, I felt that way. My target was a “house assistant” by the name of Adam Gottis. Nice lad, around the early twenties, young for his age. Probably never had a real “girlfriend” in his life. The spots on his face wouldn’t help either.

I booked in a few suites down from the loathsome Willoughby and so had Adam as a regular visitor to my rooms. I quickly cultivated him until he became enamoured with me, I have this effect on young men. Old men too, but that’s a whole other story.

As a ditsy blond bimbo, I was able to use some of my old “special” outfits. I was wearing six-inch-high heels again and the net stockings. I was always losing my room key and how difficult would it be for him to get me a master key with chain and everything? I wouldn’t take impossible as an answer. But finally got him to let me use one to get in. Feigning forgetfulness to return it, I used the equipment Jagger gave me, don’t ask where you get this stuff, and made a duplicate.

I promised Adam I’d be more careful in the future. And gave him a nice tip he appreciated. But he appreciated the kiss I gave him on the cheek. It’s a thing with men if you just give them a peck they see it for what it is.

Sometimes a quick thrill, to others a sign of acknowledgement of their presence. Rarely real affection. Most men that is.

But touch them and it becomes more serious. On the other cheek, arm, hand, or neck. To Adam, it was like a bomb going off. His face reddened, and he started a smile that wouldn't leave his face all day. He was mine.

It took three days to set everything up in all. I booked my room breakfast at seven every morning. Fuck! I didn't even know there was a seven o'clock in the morning! I thought daybreak was about eleven.

I bet he was surprised to see this very sleepy, bedraggled version of the woman who had confessed her undying love for him with a kiss, opening the door and waving him in. I needed to sharpen up here. I could start by wearing something sexy as sleepwear. I needed to raid my wardrobe again.

I gave him a tip and....another kiss. That would have to keep him going for another twenty-four hours. I then went back to bed and later flushed the breakfast down the toilet rather than let him know I hadn't eaten it.

Later I'd go home and see my loving husband. Our home was now one of his two up, two down homes in the less fashionable part of London - 'No one will think of looking for us here' deals. 64 Reese Drive, Battersea. Our romantic conversation would consist of an exact breakdown of what happened. Then a game plan for the following day. This was typical of Jagger. Long-term planning and execution. No detail left un-thought-through. Why couldn't we do this....faster?

'Tomorrow.' He said.

'What?' I said.

'We go tomorrow. Willoughby has a routine as do you. He has his shower at seven o'clock precisely every day. I like a person with regular habits, makes my job easier. So...at seven you get your breakfast trolley in your room. Only tomorrow, you're going to order exactly what Willoughby always orders.'

'I can do that. What else do I have to do?'

'That's it.'

'That's all? All this effort and when it comes to the crunch time...nothing?'

'You're safe. I said so, didn't I?'

I nodded. Unsure now. All I had to do was take breakfast as normal but change the order. I looked at him stony-faced. Something I'd practised on clients who tried to gype me of payment. 'What will you be doing, then?'

He took a long swig of his cooling black coffee and stood up. He was running through the whole scenario in his mind. Telling me just the things he thought I could cope with. If it came to a part where he was to pull out a gun and....

‘Willoughby showers at seven and gets his usual breakfast delivered at seven-thirty....’

‘By Adam.’ I added, wanting him to recognise my valuable part in this.

‘Adam. So Adam delivers your breakfast trolley at seven. I then take that trolley and get into Willoughby’s rooms, using the master key.’

‘While he’s in the shower!’ I added, and he nodded. I was treating this like a guessing game. In a way it was. Jagger being so secretive about what he does, I was only left to guess the rest.

His nod showed he was getting a little frustrated by the obvious statements and treated them merely as interruptions.

‘I swap out the suitcase and plant the gun.’

‘Wooooah! Gun! What gun? No mention of a gun. Don’t want you to mention a gun. What gun?’ My fears were coming to fruition.

‘Nick Baker’s gun. I took it after...the warehouse incident.’

‘Gun? Why a gun?’

‘I’ve wiped it clean of prints and DNA. When the police find it in Willoughby’s suite, they’ll do ballistics check on it and find it matches the slugs that killed Kyle Wilber.’

‘Kyle? Killed? Who, what? Who killed Kyle and who is he?’

‘Didn’t I mention....? No, perhaps not. Okay. If you must know....’

‘Do I want to know?’ Now totally unsure where this was leading. At the mention of a gun, I knew something about death would follow.

‘Okay.’ Jagger sat down and held my hands. He knows my opinion of violence and he’s withheld much of it from me. As this was sounding like an important part of what was about to happen, and to help me understand its importance, I was about to be told something I normally didn’t want to hear.

‘Kyle Wilber was the name of the man that Jacob Levy sent to find me. He was the one that broke into our house the other night.....’

‘And shot the dummies, you and I....’ I waved my hand to demonstrate the rest of the known part of the story.

‘Nick Baker....?’ I nodded, I knew who Nick Baker was. ‘...shot Kyle with a gun which I want to plant on Willoughby.’

He sat back to see if I was following. I slowly digested the facts and said, 'So YOU didn't kill the man that came to kill YOU?'

He shook his head. 'Didn't kill Kyle, Kyle wasn't going to kill me.'

'So why did Baker kill Kyle?'

'Because....' He sighed as if I should have got this bit. '.....Kyle was disguised as me. So Baker shot Kyle thinking....'

'He was The Magician!' I got it. I almost felt proud of myself. Until I saw the smug grin on Jagger's face and realised I was talking about murder and death as if we were discussing Strictly Come Dancing.

I remained silent. Unsure what to say and what would make him think I'm a moron, or oversensitive to his line of work. I felt a little of both right then.

'I could bribe Adam to do the swap and...the gun thing.' I suggested.

He shook his head. 'Too risky. He might have second thoughts, devastatingly persuasive as you are, my love. What if he got caught? Willoughby would take flight and we might never find him, or the material that'll put him in prison. If I do it, I'd expect to get it right.'

'What if Willoughby came out and caught you?'

'First response would be to bluff my way out of it. I've bought a staff uniform, very similar to the hotel's format. I've got a logo made up and I can look the part of a waiter bringing breakfast.

The breakfast is the same as he orders, so just say I'm new and got the delivery time wrong. If he catches me with the briefcase or the gun, I just have to subdue him and accelerate the next part of the plans. Either way, better than risking an unknown young man to do the job.'

'I'm surprised you didn't ask me to be the waitress for the day.' I looked carefully at him. Had he considered that?

'I said you'd not be put in danger.'

'So you think the waiter thing is going to be dangerous?'

'Willoughby's not violent. Not towards a man anyway. But a woman stealing his prized possessions, I wouldn't guess how far he'd go to stop you then.'

I sat with my hands flat on the tiny dining table in the small house we had to live in. I felt dejected and fearful. He had it all planned out, and I was sure it would work. So why was I quite so....depressed?

He moved closer and pulled my head to his chest. He said nothing.

There was nothing to say.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

JAGGER

I was pleased Willoughby was so predictable.

At Sara's prompting, he thought his database was no longer safe in the private bank and wanted it on his possession. So Sara mentioning it had worked. The cheque Willoughby signed for poor ol' Kyle had the Hornes bank details on it. I guessed it might be his main bank and therefore his main source of security. Who could just guess correctly someone's bank? Valuable information.

Willoughby believed he'd be a better defender of it than an armoured vault was to be proven wrong. I couldn't get at in the bank, but now he was vulnerable. If he thought no one knew where he was staying, he was wrong again.

The Justin notebook was genuine. It was the same one I lifted off his body before he was buried by the Kobays. I'd copied its contents and put that info in a very safe place. But inside the cheap cover, I'd sewn a small device. He'd be too interested in the contents to think there was a tracker.

So I was within a mile of him all the way to the bank. I saw him come out and the weight of something extra in his shabby jacket pocket. I followed him to the store where he bought the briefcase where I visited later and bought an identical one.

For months I'd been researching Willoughby with very little success. There were few people who knew him. He left no paper trail. The man was even more cautious than me. Some people called him "The Eel". It was a suitable name. In prison, they'd known this but changed it to "Elle". Prison humour, I suppose.

It certainly seems that Willoughby is not sexually active in any way. This ruled out using Lucie as a lure. However, the hotel staff are not so celibate. With a little digging and pretence of being an hotel inspector, I established Adam Gottis as the most likely candidate. Especially as he was the one staff member with the most access to Willoughby. He was also young and male. Perfect for Lucie.

For the next few days, I followed Willoughby everywhere. He didn't go out much. He visited a few restaurants where he met with some people I photographed, but he was nervous. Willoughby carried the case everywhere with him. Inside his case was my tracking device, so I followed him easily.

I was sure at some time Willoughby would edit all his digital records, taking out any reference to him and criminal activity. I wanted the masters if possible. Also, the hard drive would have his fingerprints and DNA on it. Concrete proof. Even The Eel wouldn't be able to wriggle out of that.

I took a temporary membership at a gym the other side of town and pounded away on the treadmill. Everything ran through my head. I thought through every permutation and possible anomalies. My exit strategy was as best as I could get it. I'd a few options if caught by Willoughby coming out of the shower early, or not even being awake when I went in.

If everything collapsed at the first hurdle, we might try it again in a few days' time.

I checked out my disguise for the third time. Swarthy skin tone. Dark moustache and beard. Jet black long wavy hair. Dark brown, almost black, contact lenses. High heels and elevators in the boots. I had a tight girdle that took pounds off me and I had a slight Latino accent ready if needed. My uniform was as realistic as I could make it and freshly laundered and looking neat. I tugged at the short jacket to help with the posture.

So as Adam knocked on Lucie's door at seven, I was hiding in the bathroom. I heard a mumble of conversation through the door and then the bathroom door jerked open. I could tell by Lucie's eyes she was frightened. For me, not for her. I gave her a swift kiss on the lips then gently took her chin in my hands and gave her a long lingering kiss.

I saw a smile forming and she pushed back her unruly morning hair from her face. 'No point in saying be careful, is there?' She said, the smile now reaching her eyes.

'I'll be back before you've time to clean your teeth.'

She followed as I walked into the main room. 'Will you make it all worth it when you come back?' I understood she was trying to hold on to humour to force away the fear.

'With that sort of offer, I'll be back before you've put the paste on your toothbrush.' I winked at her and pushed the trolley towards the front door. From behind the door I picked up the briefcase and slid it onto the lower platform on the trolley. The long dining cloth hung down to hide it. Next to the case I put the gun, wrapped up in a white hotel napkin. Next to that a few small sacks.

The hallway was empty. I'd already checked the schedule for room delivery breakfasts for that day. The next was due at seven-twenty. That's how long I had. I hoped I wouldn't need all that time. At 309 I pressed my ear to the door and heard nothing. It was seven-oh-five.

With a soft knuckle rap, I pushed the master card into the electronic lock and heard the click. The light turned to green, and I pushed the trolley quietly into the room. It was empty. I could now hear the shower running in the bathroom.

I quickly went to the first place I'd decided was the best hiding place for the briefcase. I had Lucie's room to fully understand the layout and had

decided I'd put a briefcase in the wardrobe. Cleaners and staff rarely needed to open those doors.

It was there, lying on the floor. I memorised its exact position before I picked it up and moved back to the trolley. The shower was still running. I hefted both cases and found my one a little light compared with the original. I quickly opened it and loaded a few of the small sacks of sand I'd prepared the day before. Once the weight felt similar, I put my briefcase where the other had lain. Exactly as I remembered.

I went back to the trolley, still aware of running water. I took the gun wrapped in a napkin and went back to the wardrobe. Usually, the highest shelf is the least used. In this case, the shelf was high and deep. There were some folded garments of Willoughby's already there.

From the floor, you couldn't see the back of the shelf. Willoughby was shorter than me and should see even less. I reached way back and pushed the wrapped gun far into the corner. I closed the wardrobe and ran through everything quickly to make sure I'd not forgotten or missed anything.

I was hoping Willoughby wouldn't need to keep checking the secured goods are still there. If he discovers the goods are gone, he would disappear and even the police won't be able to find him. But just in case, the next part of the plan needs to be moved along quickly.

The shower was still running as I opened the door and checked the hallway was clear. I gently eased the door shut. As with all hotels where the doors are electronic, they close with a surprisingly loud sound as the lock shoots home.

I sauntered to Lucie's room and slipped in the master key and pushed the trolley in, easing the door shut behind me. I looked at my watch. Seven-oh-eight. Three minutes.

Lucie was standing as I'd left her. Hands to her mouth. The relief reached her eyes first as she ran into my arms and she kissed me several times quite hard.

'Careful.' I said pulling back to get my breath. 'I'm a married man.'

Now the fear had left her, a relief filled her mind, she did what most women do to celebrate the safety of their men home from battle.

She cried profusely.

CHAPTER FORTY

ORLANDO

I was undecided whether to accept the invitation or not.

It was a lovely autumn day, so I decided that would be my excuse to say yes. Also, I was curious to know what it was all about.

Tea Michigan was seated on the park bench and looking idly around him. He was dressed as I'd met him before, but with a winter coat and gloves on. He still wore white socks with black trainers. Still looked very odd. He saw me coming and smiled. I sat beside him and offered my hand. He took his hand firmly in mine.

'How ya doin?'' I said breezily.

'Fine. Did you hear The Magician is dead?'

No small talk here. 'Yeah. Heard that. Who did you hear that from?'

'One of my sources.'

We sat in silence as I tried to work out what that brief conversation really meant. Eventually, I said, 'So this brings an end to your quest?' He nodded, little knowing The Magician was still very much alive.

I'd remembered his sad look the last time we met, when he'd mentioned one of The Magician's victims was related to him. 'Family honour now settled is it?' I said.

He looked at me with his dark eyes set in an olive skin. The eyes looked fierce behind the dark-rimmed spectacles. I thought he was about to chastise me in some way. I braced myself, but nothing happened. He looked away and stared at the trees starting to shed their leaves.

'It's autumn for everything it seems.' I let the silence hang. 'It's the autumn of my quest. All over, but the shouting as they say. Autumn for my career too. I think I'll retire.'

'Good luck to you, then. Pity you never captured The Magician though. Shame. All those years.' What did he want to see me for?

He turned to me and said, 'It could be autumn for your career too, Mr Stone.'

I tried to smile but couldn't. The man was very odd. 'Why do you say that?'

'How much would it take for you to retire, Orlando?'

'I don't know.' I said clearly puzzled. 'Why do you ask?'

'I'm going to give you an opportunity to get out of the business you're in. Find...a new career path for yourself. Make your family a better life. Would you be interested in that?'

'You offering me your job, Michigan?'

From the inside pocket of his huge coat, he took a light brown envelope. It looked heavy and appeared well padded. He placed it on the seat between the two of us.

'How much would you like to see Jamison Willoughby sent to prison? For life?'

I felt a pang of fear, then anger, then both. 'You know he kidnapped my family? Tortured me. Made me say things..... Of course, I'd like to see him in prison.' My fingers rubbed the scar as if in memory.

He slid the packet towards me. His eyes rose up to mine and there was no emotion in his eyes or voice as he said, 'There's everything you need to put him away. Right in there.' He tapped the package almost lovingly with a gloved hand.

I looked at the innocent package and wonder what might be in that? What would bring down a slippery customer like Willoughby?

'But it's going to take a bit of sacrifice from you, I'm afraid.' Michigan added flatly.

I reached out for the package and his hand pressed down preventing me from taking it. 'Are you prepared to sacrifice something for the imprisonment of that man?'

I looked him full in the eye and knew my voice was croaky. 'Yes.' Now, what was I getting into?

He looked all around before dropping his voice and said, 'Can you.....delete all your business activities from over the last ten years? Can you remove any evidence you've been involved with assassins and murderers and gangland killings? Can you leave no trace for the police to find?'

I had to think about that but knew it was possible. There's rarely a paper trail in my business. I'd been schooled by the best there were in their day, and added a few wrinkles of my own, bringing the system up to date. Payments are mostly offshore, imported into the country through legitimate shell companies. As far as the world knew I was an importer and exporter of people's investments.

'I think so. Why?'

'Can you develop a suitable cover story for how you've supported your family for all that time?'

Again I had to think. I should come up with something. I might say ...my previous employers left me a fund to live off, and it's now run out. Something like that. Why these strange questions? I just nodded. Again I looked at the package.

Michigan removed his hands and folded them across his lap. 'Take the package and decide what you want to do with it.'

'What's in it?' I said quietly.

He seemed distracted and looked at the falling leaves as he said, 'Everything you need to convict Willoughby. His true association with The Brethren. Details of all their crimes and who was doing what, and to whom. Details of the murder of a Bounty Hunter named Kyle Wilber. Willoughby admitted having him killed. In a separate envelope there are details of where that body can be found. He has on him a cheque paid for his services, signed by Willoughby, along with fingerprints. The gun used to shoot Kyle is in Willoughby's hotel suite. Hotel Colonial.'

My mouth must be open in surprise. How on earth....?

'There are also details of how he avoided imprisonment on the original charges the police arrested him for. With that information in there, they can recharge him, and a whole lot more. It's very damning. He'll not be able to refute any of it. He can go away for life. It's up to you.'

'Where did you get.....?'

'Recordings of the Ryce-Hardins and their association with Willoughby have....gone missing. Perhaps he erased them.'

'But how....?' Was all I managed. My mind was in a whirl.

'If you hand those into the police, you'll get a warm welcome. But they'll want to know where you got them from. They'll also make a deep investigation into you, too. Just in case you were part of the Willoughby crime wave. So remove all evidence of your....more suspicious activities.'

'Just hand this into the police?'

'Sure. Throw away this covering envelope. Handle everything with gloves so there're no prints or DNA of yours there. All they will find is Willoughby's. Oh...there's also a notebook in there that details his involvement with the attempted murder of Hungarian citizens. Comprehensive, isn't it?'

His eyes were sparkling now. My eyes were watering. Was it tears? I couldn't tell. This was too much for me to take in.

'Are you willing to make the sacrifice, Orlando? Or shall I give this to someone else to make a name for themselves?'

I clutched the package to my chest in answer. 'Why are you doing this? Why me?'

'Good deeds deserve rewarding, Orlando. For your good deed, this is a reward. If you choose to see it as so.'

'What good deed? I don't....'

'You chose to try to save a life by driving to a lonely farmhouse. Remember?' I nodded. What had this to do with anything? That was The Magician...wait!

'I thought you were after the Magician? Why...why do you think that was a good deed? I'd a thought you'd be angry at....'

He was shaking his head. 'If you understand magic at all, you'll understand illusion and deception is a major part of it. Just accept that your good deed has given you the opportunity of a lifetime. If there's any reward going for....' He pointed to the package on my chest. '...take it and run. But do it all *now*. Time is short. Take up a career as...a private investigator. Tell the police this was your first and last amateur case. Live life, Orlando.'

He stood, a little shakily and offered his hand again. In a mist I took it and he squeezed hard.

'We'll not meet again. I like autumn, don't you? Such a nice soft ending to everything. Including criminal careers.'

He was walking away. There were so many questions I needed to ask but couldn't think of one.

I shouted after him, 'How can I contact you if I need anything?'

His voice was faint, but I heard, 'I have a website.'

The leaves were falling on top of me and some settled on the package. I brushed them off and looked inside. A black box, an envelope and a notebook.

How could such simple things be able to change so many lives?

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

SARA

I got a call from Simms the other day.

I still can't believe what he had to say. He started off by thanking me for all the help with Willoughby. Then he said....I'd see the results in a few days and hoped I could feel proud and Charles feel relieved.

Of course, I'd no idea what he was on about until the morning news a few days later - it was all there. It was in the papers. It was everywhere. For weeks and weeks.

We don't normally get the tabloids, but I had to read everything about the arrest of Jamison Willoughby. They were claiming him the "crime boss of the century". A puppet master to the crime syndicates. All rubbish, of course. Wasn't it?

His lawyer was once again that odious man Jacob Levy. He loves the camera. The plucked eyebrows, sincere looks and a false smile. A face for radio, that one. He was damming of the police evidence saying it had no traceability and was therefore false.

The prosecution didn't agree and set a trial for the Old Bailey. You don't get more serious than that. A hearing had been set for the next day. How quick were they to get that underway? The police finally had their man, and they were not going to let some weaselly lawyer get him out of it again.

Charles took an interest in the proceedings and it seemed to buck him up. I hadn't seen him so animated for months. We even sat down and watched the news together. A cup of tea and nice scones made it an event. Our relief was evident to us both.

We felt a small rise of panic when the weasel Levy appeared on the screen brandishing those awful sketches again. We turned up the sound to hear what he had to say.

'My client Mr Willoughby is clearly wrongfully charged. The accusations have no grounding whatsoever. All evidence is pitifully inadmissible. The true culprit is this man...' he was shaking sketches into the camera. 'This man here is the root of all these accusations. There was a reward for his capture of one million pounds. But my client, to prove his innocence, has raised this to three million pounds! For any information that leads to the capture of this man. A further million pounds once my client has been cleared of the charges and is once again a free man where he belongs.'

His eyes were wide with excitement as the public moment gripped him. Charles looked at me and said, 'What did he say?'

'The same as before. They think that man, The Magician is behind all this.'

'Rubbish. He's dead. Nicker.....well, he's dead. Can't do it from the grave, can he? He's not that bloody good.'

'Yes, dear.' Was all I commented on. Nicker did what? I needed to find out later.

But Charles hadn't finished. 'Who's going to bloody get any money for rattling him out if he's dead. No idiots' going to get a penny. Capture? If he's dead how can they capture him?' He heaved himself out of the chair to get another whisky.

I sort of agreed with him. But I was left with a strange feeling. Willoughby was no fool. He wouldn't throw his money around unless he was certain something would come of it. Although no result, no payment. Or were they so desperate to deflect the attention from Willoughby to ...anyone...else?

Willoughby was partly responsible for my children's death. He deserved everything that came to him. This Magician fellow they were after seemed, straight enough when we met him. He had powerful arguments decrying everything Willoughby said. Now here was Willoughby facing a trial for life imprisonment. Who would I believe? A dead man, or this...slimy lawyer?

Time would tell.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

LUCIE

The news sent an arrow of fear through my heart.

I was at first delighted to see that Willoughby had been arrested. The length of charges must be some sort of world record.

We'd done it! We were free from the creepy one. Life could return to normal. We could make up our mind's what was "normal" and live it. We could go back to the farm and start all over again. Be happy. Go shopping. See neighbours. Have dinner parties. Go to the cinema. Live as other people lived. Normal people.

Jagger was "out" and I couldn't celebrate with him until he came home.

Then the slam dunk to my heart.

A bigger reward!

Out from the rocks would come the creeps. The primordial slime looking for get-rich-quick solutions. Not all would see "capture" as a necessity.

Jagger had once said there may be troubled times to come. Which was why we needed the low profile. He could now easily say, 'I told you so'.

I sat and cried. For an hour, non-stop. My eyes were a sight as I looked in the mirror and tried to pad them dry. I'd a vast range of makeup but mostly back at the farm. Here, I had a minimal amount. I looked at my face and saw myself ten years older than I was yesterday.

I saw myself in the same position as I'd found myself several times this last year. Back to square one. On the run. Hiding from....everyone. Frightened of a knock on the door. Frightened every time my husband left the house. The wave of relief when he came back.

It seemed worse than waving a soldier off to war, it seemed more dangerous than that. At least the army would know who they were fighting, they also had other people to help kill the enemy.

I felt I couldn't take it anymore. This was not me. It was never me. I had been pulled into Jagger's plans bit by bit. Each time we thought it was the end, another blow, another run and hide. Another fight.

I had no fight left.

I knew that now I was a target too. People knew about our association. Knew he had a wife, knew what I looked like. I was as much a danger to him as he was to himself. He couldn't move because I'd stifle him, he had to

protect both of us. On his own, he was supreme, assured and confident. With me in tow, he was vulnerable.

I dried the tears and took a last look at the face in the mirror that was, Mrs Gilchrist.

I'd a limited amount of clothes and accessories I could carry with me, so chose a universal suit that could pass for several occasions. Sensible shoes and as much makeup that would fit my large handbag. Some cash. There was not much to pack.

The note took longer.

I forced the tears to stay where they were. Time for self-pity was over. I'd cried enough. Both over my husband and over my concern for him.

I left the wedding ring on top of the note and closed the door on my way out.

A taxi was available at the end of the road. I took three of them, a bus and two trains. I'd learned a lot from The Magician. Make it impossible for anyone following to find you. A proper exit strategy for me. A survival strategy for him.

I did not want to be found.

By *anyone*.

Final Sequel:

[Terminal Strategy.](#)

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