



TERMINAL

STRATEGY

He just wanted to retire -
They just wouldn't listen ...

A thriller by
MAX DRAYTON

TERMINAL STRATEGY

A thriller by

Max Drayton

There is language, violence and scenes of adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

If you enjoyed this novel, please let me know.

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

max@maxdrayton.co.uk

www.maxdrayton.co.uk

TERMINAL STRATEGY

Part Three of a Trilogy

A thriller by

MAX DRAYTON

'If my life so far was a movie, there would be no sequel.'

Jagger Gilchrist.

'Knowledge is power. Power is everything.'

Jamison Willoughby

'The media would have you believe spies and hit men have super powers and were super fit. Not true. There's a limit to all bodies. As you age, these decline. The strongest thing a hit man needs is a clear mind.'

Jagger Gilchrist.

PROLOGUE

I started out to write Exit Strategy as a story woven around the facts. The sequel was more character driven than fact. In this, the final of the trilogy, I wanted to introduce more action.

By the very nature of the storyline, it is slightly darker than the previous novels. But the story had to be pursued to the bitter end.

I hope the three novels form a whole story and that they have revealed the hidden world of assassinations - a little.

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 choking 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?

BOOK TWO - SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Released from prison because of lack of evidence, Jamison Willoughby is an outcast. His wife has left him, and his money is frozen by the police whilst they investigate his crimes further. He needs help and a sponsor. He turns to Charles Ryce-Hardin, the father of the two twins, murdered by the Magician,

Using his knowledge of where Justin lies dead in Hungary, he persuades Charles to fund his legal fees for the defence of his innocence. Suggesting they both can help each other to bring closure to his children's deaths and the murderer to justice.

Charles, an ex-colonel, retired under suspicious circumstances, still maintains contact with his small force of dedicated military men. Willoughby tells of the Hungarian farm where Justin was murdered, and Charles sends his force of mercenaries to bring back the body.

The mercenaries capture the Kobay family and extract the information about Justin's body. They exhume him and put into operation a plan to capture Justin's killer. They trick The Magician to come to the aid of the family. But the Magician is one step ahead of them, getting there a day earlier and wipes out the majority of the mercenaries. Leaving two alive, he gets them back to England with the body of Justin and a message to all concerned - to leave him alone.

With Willoughby pushing him, Charles still pursues the Magician, sending his men to torture Orlando Stone for a description of the invisible assassin. Orlando, an agent for assassins, has met The Magician.

A man named Michigan introduces himself to Charles and Willoughby, saying he has pursued The Magician for ten years and is the man with the most knowledge about the assassin. They can help each other.

The real Magician risks his life and appeals in person to the Ryce-Hardins to leave him alone. Telling many home truths about Willoughby and Charles Ryce-Hardin's past misdemeanours.

Willoughby's convictions are finally dropped, and he gets his fortune back. He decides to break with Charles. Despite Charles's now reluctance to pursue The Magician any more, Willoughby broadcasts sketches, as detailed by Orlando, of The Magician nationwide, in order to clear his name.

Willoughby's lawyer, Levy, uses a Bounty Hunter called Kyle to find The Magician. He tracks The Magician to a farm owned by Jagger and contacts Levy for instructions. Willoughby, meanwhile, has contracted the two surviving mercenaries, Nick and Tamm, to work for him. He and his new

recruits head for the farm for a rendezvous with Kyle and to mete out justice to the Magician.

Impatient Kyle breaks into the house to capture the Magician, but because of Orlando's timely information, Jagger captures Kyle. The Magician disguises himself as Kyle and meets his visitors. In anger, Nick kills Kyle, thinking he is the Magician who killed his colleagues. The Magician is now officially dead.

Showing gratitude to Orlando, Jagger sets up a trap for Nick and Tamm. Orlando kills Nick, the man who tortured him and helped kidnapped his family to get that description of The Magician.

Jagger discovers that Willoughby, for the whole of his criminal life, has made sound recordings of all his dealings. He tricks Willoughby into taken personal possession of these recordings and steals them from him, with the help of the increasingly stressed Lucie.

Jagger gets Orlando to present this damning evidence against Willoughby to the police who is imprisoned again with a long sentencing ensured.

Despite his plight, Willoughby will not drop the bounty on The Magician and Jagger and Lucie fears they will never allow their freedom.

In desperation, Lucie leaves Jagger and sets off on her own. For the safety of them both.

TERMINAL STRATEGY

PART ONE – A LIFE CHANGED

CHAPTER ONE

LUCIE GILCHRIST

It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, leaving the man I love.

I've left him for all the right reasons, but that doesn't make me feel I've done the right thing. I sneaked away while he was out and felt all sorts of guilt about that. But I know if I told him face to face....neither of us could handle that.

For the first two hours my eyes never dried, I became embarrassed on the buses and in the taxis I used to get away. My husband is a first-class tracker. He's first-class in almost everything, even murder. To distance myself from him was paramount to both our survival.

That was my thinking.

But I knew he'd try to find me. I dread to think what would happen then. Not that he would hurt me, admonish me, or even be angry, Jagger wasn't like that. He would be hurt, but he would get over that, as he got over all emotions - shove it behind him and move on. But he would try to find me – to make sure I was safe.

I only had one option I could consider. The first priority when on the run is where to stay. I needed a bed and safety for the first night. There are a million hotels in London and many more in the rest of the country. But I couldn't see myself staying out of London. It's the only place I really know and understand. I've never been on a plane or left England. I don't have a passport, never needed to. So any hotel will do, for one night.

I got off a bus in Tottenham and instantly hated the place. Not for any other reason than I hadn't been there before. One less place for Jager to look for me. I took a side turning, found a small hotel and took a deep breath before going in.

In any hotel, a single woman booking a room can be suspicious to the reception staff. I am quite tall, slim and have been called attractive. At least that's what Jagger says and who am I to disagree with him?

Carrying the minimum amount of luggage, I walked up to the reception. I took the time to look around and realised this wasn't too bad. I've been in many hotels, on business and many worse than this. But then I wasn't planning to spend a night. Well...spend the night to sleep, anyway.

The middle-aged man flashed a practised smile at me and welcomed me. 'Do you have a tariff?' I asked with an equally professional smile.

He maintained his grin and handed me a small leaflet. I flicked through it and sighed. I'd limited financial resources and no idea how long they needed to last. Right now I was beginning to realise I'd not thought this through carefully enough. Jagger would've calculated all the problems, solutions, alternative solutions, alternative options, what to have with him in case needed. Yada, Yada, Yada. But I wasn't Jagger.

One thing I quickly realised, was this was a business man's hotel. The sort that offered reasonably priced accommodation for the business traveller needing a single, or few night's stay. They had a few single rooms. I thought if I took one of those, the management would be less worried about my purpose in staying. Professional paranoia, or just smart thinking on my part?

'Single room, please. One night only. Plane to catch tomorrow.' I said with a sweet smile. Now the next potential problem, paying with cash.

I counted out eighty pounds and laid them on the counter. Leaned towards him and smiled, 'Receipt, please.' I thought that might make me seem more commerce orientated. I was trying to think like Jagger. 'Sorry about the cash. Dumping sterling. Won't need it for a few months.'

'That's fine, madam. What name shall I put on the receipt?'

I hadn't thought of that. Make up one quickly, you stupid bitch. What was the name of that teacher I hated in college Vera....something...?

'Vera Thomas. Thank you.'

'My pleasure, Miss Thomas. Will you require anything in the morning? Paper, breakfast in your room?' The smile was fixed now. He wasn't sure about me. Good, better than him thinking I was a working girl looking for new territory? Been there, done that, know what that's like.

'No, thank you. I'll be sleeping late and won't need breakfast. Do I need to check out at all as I've already paid?' Another nice smile.

'No, Miss Thomas. Leave when you like. Have a good evening. Room 408. Lifts to the right over there. Need a hand with yourluggage?'

I suspected a real question behind the spoken question. Why wouldn't I be travelling light? But the use of the title "Miss", rather than "Mrs" was interesting.

I started to walk away and stopped. I'm not a woman that can be walked over, I'm single-minded and of a strong personality. I didn't like the fixed smile that had become a smirk. I didn't like what I thought was going on behind the eyes of the grubby little man.

I walked back to the desk, and he looked at my face, when before it was my bum he was scrutinising. I was thinking furiously and remembered a ruse I'd used in the past that seemed to work well with difficult people. Well....difficult men.

'I know what you're thinking, but here's the thing. I'm not a hooker. I'm a stewardess who's missed her flight. I could lose my job over this. I just need a night's sleep before catching the plane tomorrow.'

'Madam....I was not....'

I held my hand up to stop his protestations. 'I'm sure that's right. But just in case, let me tell you I'm having a rough time and can do without the attitude. Okay?'

He was smart enough not to answer me as I turned and walked towards the lift. That should stop any tittle-tattle amongst the staff. Let's hope he can forget about me now. I wanted no one to remember me being here.

The room was small but clean. Tiny TV on a chest of drawers, single bedside lamp and a small bathroom. It would do. If I was going to be miserable, the surroundings might as well match.

I pushed my small wheelie into a corner and threw myself onto the bed. For the first time since I'd made my decision, I could cry as long as I wanted to without being embarrassed. The tears wouldn't come. But the memories did. In droves.

I've been a fugitive for a while now in my own home. But this suddenly was different. I was alone. The one protector, my husband, I'd left to fend for himself. I had to find myself a new way of life and I was totally not ready for that.

I tried to control my thought processes. But kept drifting off subject into realms of fantasy and memories. I had to focus and get myself out of the mess I'd put myself into. Priorities. It always comes down to priorities. If I was in hiding, I needed somewhere to hide. Somewhere safe and well hidden. Preferably comfortable as well. Oh....and cheap. Where on earth was I going to find somewhere with all those attributes?

Sharen hadn't worn well at all.

I remembered her as a bubbly redhead with a great figure and large boobs. She looked twenty years older than when I'd last seen her, eight years ago. She recognised me immediately.

Sharen was her working name, but I didn't know any other for her. I know she liked to spell it with an 'E' not an 'O', but the punters never asked.

We hugged, and cheek kissed. She said I looked great, and I said, 'Fuck!.....so do you.'

I can't believe I did that! I actually went to my old stamping ground looking for prostitutes. There's an irony in there somewhere that my tired and now addled brain couldn't figure out. I needed to find someone I knew. I thought if I could hide in a community I was familiar with, I'd be safer.

What a stupid shit idea was that! But it worked. Sharen!

She was working for a guy called Pascal and didn't want me to distract her. She'd a minimum to earn each night, or he got nasty. So she agreed to have coffee with me at noon the following day. We agreed on a place and I left her to it.

It was most strange walking down the darker streets, where women of the night still hung around waiting for trade. I was one of those girls once. It seemed an age ago now, but it wasn't, really. It made me think how times had changed. How much I'd left behind. What was I doing back here again?

Jagger had got me out of all that. First by getting rid of my pimp, Rico. Then he set me up in a nice place with financial backing until I could get my own clientele. I never really paid it all back to him. Then, by marrying me and moving to a lovely farmhouse in the country.

Now, what was I going to do? Earn a living as I did those days?

Fuck that!

But what alternative could I come up with? I consoled myself that my arranged meeting with Sharen wasn't about me starting in the business all over again. It was solely to seek refuge. That, I was determined upon.

In the meantime..... I returned to the streets again. My main luggage in a station locker and I'd just a handbag for company. If I checked into a hotel now, there would be no doubt what I was about. There was nothing for it but to haul myself back to the station, collect what passes as luggage and find another hotel.

This wasn't difficult. The hotel "Knightsbridge", a grandiose name, but not too bad. Was I accepting lower standards as normal already? The rooms were small, a double this time. Same old bland decoration. But I felt tired and hit the sack as soon as I'd had a shower and dried my hair.

I slept well. I was up early, at ten o'clock, and ready to leave by eleven-thirty. I had on my only other suit I'd brought with me. I didn't want to turn up in the same clothes as yesterday. What would Sharen think? By the time I told her everything, she'd think the same as if I'd worn the same outfit. Who am I kidding?

She looked tired and anaemic. I paid for the coffees and a doughnut. She ate little and her eyes looked bloodshot. She was on something and I felt a pang of pity for her. Her life had not improved like mine. She was one of the many girls that couldn't find a way out of the prison.

The business was nothing but modern-day slavery. You had a master who controlled what you did every day. And night. You had no time off, no holidays, no reason to leave and go anywhere else.

My thoughts drifted back to Olga Kobay. The assassin that Jagger had saved, protected and helped a few short months ago. It seemed a lifetime ago a pimp trapped her. Selling her out as a contract killer. That had ended better for her than her pimp.

I looked back at my time on the streets from a distance now and see how bad it really was. The girls inside could not do anything about their lives, so there was an ultimate acceptance. Little things in life would become a treat. A smile. A nice tip. A genuine expression of emotion. Love was never an emotion experienced by these women. It made me feel exceptionally lucky but terribly lonely. I was throwing all that away.

Was I absolutely sure I wanted this path?

We talked for an hour. In that time she'd very little to tell me. Her life had changed hardly at all. New accommodation. New handler. Same old type of clientele. I was on the verge of tears for her. She saw them coming and reached out her hand to mine.

'What's the matter, Luce? How can I help?'

I let the tears flow for a while. It had to happen sooner or later. I'd cried so much on my own these last few days, it was a novelty to have a sympathetic ear for a change.

I told her as much as I could. I left out the bit about my husband being a serial killer. I just said there were some issues with my husband that only he could resolve without me being there. That was the truth, but it was so much more complex than that. I could no longer think clear enough to rationalise it anymore.

Soon I felt we were both sympathising with just me, when clearly Sharen was the woman who needed the most support. At least long term. For now, I had to be selfish and think of myself, short-term.

'I need somewhere to hole-up for a while. Week or so, I guess.' I said dabbing my eyes with a tissue.

She thought for a moment and drained her second cup of tea. 'Where I live isn't nice, love. Ritz, it ain't. Single rooms, shared bathroom. A working house, nothing more. Sleep in the bed during the day, work in it at night.'

But there are spare rooms. I can get you in, but....well....look at you. You're a class above the girls there. You're gonna stand out a bit, love.'

I nodded and thought it through as I got more tea. She was almost asleep on the table when I returned.

But I'd made a decision.

The room was awful! Even on my worse days I never had to put up with this. The principle being, that any stranger entering this room would be overtaken by lust and wouldn't notice the surroundings. When it was all over it, would sink in and the man would leave quickly and never want to come back again. Leaving the room for the next customer. Quick turnover, larger profit.

This was bad business. The whole block was owned by Sharen's pimp, Pascal. A North Londoner with a fondness of French impressionism. If he spent a little more on the décor and made everything attractive, he would have a more regular clientele and make more money. The girls would be happier, and the world would be a little brighter.

What was I thinking? Was I thinking of being a Madam now!

I felt very insecure here. Pascal didn't know I was here. But the girls would soon notice a new arrival and talk. He would be pounding my door down asking for earnings. I couldn't stay here.

After an hour I decided this wasn't the solution. I still didn't know what was...but I had to leave. I packed my bags for the umpteenth time and headed towards the door.

I opened it and nearly fainted.

Rico stood there, grinning at me.

CHAPTER TWO

TONI MOSS

I've been called a Bounty Hunter many times, but it just isn't true!

In Britain, there's no such thing. In America, it's big business and there are even TV reality shows about it. Over there, a registered Bounty Hunter can take an active part in bringing a suspect to court for trial. There's even an old Latin name for this, *qui tam*. Sometimes, they can even represent the prosecution in court after arresting the fugitive. The Hunter gets to keep a percentage of the penalties awarded against the villain.

In America you can drive around like a Marshall from *Gunsmoke*, guns hanging off your belt and arrest anyone you like that's a criminal. At least, some people out there think that's how it's done.

But here in the UK – it doesn't exist. Not in the pure sense that everyone thinks about, there's no formal system at least. However..... people who *might* be described as Bounty Hunters work in cooperation with the police and insurance companies to recover stolen goods and things like motor vehicles. The "Bounty" is pre-negotiated and so it's a fixed fee. Mainly payable by results, not promises.

For some people, this can be a good business to get into. Some people.

People like me.

The most important skill needed is a sound working knowledge of the relevant laws. Otherwise, it's easy to commit offences in the course of any investigation. This causes problems with the very authorities who want to employ you. So you need to be careful and know what you're doing. Other than that....good investigative skills, lots of persistence, some confidence, bloody-mindedness and basic common sense are what's needed.

I'm best at persistence and bloody-mindedness.

I've recently worked, indirectly, for the UK Border Agency. I work for a sub-contracted company that seek and find potential overstayers in the UK. This list of special clientele is known as the Migrant Refusal Pool, a wonderful tactful use of English definition. These are workers and students who've refused to leave Britain after their initial visas expired, and who therefore are living here illegally.

Illegal immigrants by any other name.

Finding them is a bastard job at times. When these people go underground, they have a whole support system of their own nationals hiding them. Going undercover in ghettos is difficult for a white woman with

naturally blond hair. But I have my methods and get away with a lot, when I'm determined enough to employ unusual tactics.

Once again, payment is only by results, so we're all diligent employees, of a company who are also employees of a government department. The sheer complexity, and bureaucratic nature, of it all at times hamper success.

At a slightly lower level, where I really started, are the Hunters that target motorists for unpaid parking fines that are registered to their cars. The drivers believe they are unjustly hounded for debts they did not know they had. Some do not know that they face bailiff's fees and having their credit ratings affected by those unpaid fines.

Are these real criminals? Course not. But they have broken the law? And where the law is broken, there's money to be made putting it right.

There are even some desperate Hunters now that walk the streets using number plate recognition software to find cars with unpaid fines or Road Taxes. But Bailiffs are the growing trade in Britain. Knocking on doors and demanding payment. Once again, they're only paid by results. So persistence and patience are the bywords for this trade too.

Now I look back on my relatively short career as a Hunter, it all seems so pointless and boring. Tracking an unsuspecting target for days, for a few quid reward. Who wants to do that forever?

Now a few million quid! That's worth the effort.

As soon as I saw the announcement several things popped into my mind. Apart from a new house, I desperately needed, was the legality of it. I was mollified by the thought that it was a senior legal councillor offering the reward. If it wasn't legal and genuine, how could he do that?

I rationalised later that the reward was for information. It required no actual contact with the fugitive. This was different. I was used to actual contact, I liked actual contact. It was a suitable end of a hunt to actually touch your prey. Almost a 'tag, you're it' scenario.

So I cancelled all my plans for the next few weeks and decided to register as a contestant in this race to get a man called The Magician. Half expecting to be part of a three-ring circus, I made an appointment to see the man holding the cheque for my new house.

Jacob Levy was a strange man. He was instantly aloof when he realised Toni was a woman. He was tall, thin and bald. Levy wore rimless glasses and I could imagine him strutting before the witnesses, haranguing the defendant and blasting them with insightful logic and winning high-profile cases.

To me, he said, 'What do you want?'

In a male-dominated business like mine, I'm used to the male reaction to a woman stepping on their toes. Instead of stepping gently, I'm of the disposition to step harder. Added to the male ego that the name Toni isn't that of a man, some lack the intellect that the spelling should have been a giveaway.

'Details of your bounty, Councillor. You still have the bounty active, I assume? It's open to all, I assume? Your frequent TV broadcasts don't say otherwise.'

I watched his face. A professional cast came over it. He sat, whereas he'd wanted to remain standing. I stood, where I wanted to sit. I sat anyway without invitation. I saw a look of disapproval swiftly cross his face.

'Indeed. The bounty is still....open. What credentials do you have Miss.....er...Moss?' He shoved the piece of paper with my name on it across the table as if to dismiss me along with it.

I stared at him levelly. I waited until I saw a slight flicker of annoyance on his face. He was not used to being kept waiting. 'What credentials do you require?' I said sitting back and crossing my legs.

I was wearing black leggings today, with a bright red top and light silk white jacket. I suppose the tennis shoes didn't fit the ensemble, but then high fashion isn't exactly my thing. If it's hanging, and it's clean, I'll wear it. I watched him take me all in and made a judgement that he would change later. Most men do.

'We can't let any....body run around chasing known and dangerous criminals, can we? It would be most irresponsible of us. Don't you agree?'

I nodded. 'Absolutely right. So who've you got responding so far? Chief Detectives from Scotland Yard? Sherlock Holmes, he wouldn't want to miss out on this adventure. Who, Mr Levy and exactly what credentials have they offered you?'

He stood. 'Miss....Moss. I feel the seriousness of this situation may have passed you by. We're looking for....professional people who can track down and find a single wanted – dangerous - man.'

'Then I'm your man. Or woman, in case you haven't noticed. That's what I do, have done for the last nine years. Would you like a long list of the people I've apprehended? Helped prosecute. Put behind bars, put into debtor's prison. If you feel you have the time to read the long list, then I've got the time to wait. If you feel that you don't believe my resume and wish to check it, then it's your decision. You'll be delaying me from hunting this most terrible man you seek.'

I can be quite verbal when I get into a flow, I'm never quite sure of the right place to stop. I believe the more I dislike the person I'm talking too, the longer the dialogue. I hadn't finished with this jerk.

'We can do this one of two ways, Mr Levy. I can get your man with, or without your cooperation. But let's be clear. If it's without, then when I get him, I'll not be too cooperative with you then. I understand other parties are interested in interviewing him.'

'Please try to understand my position here, Miss....'

'Moss! It's an easy enough name to remember.'

'Yes, Moss. This has already attracted a great deal of interest and comment. Not all the comment is positive for my law firm. So you'll understand, I'm sure, if I'm reticent to have anunknown woman let loose after a known killer. How bad is that going to look in the press? Your....demise associated with my firm. Not to mention your relatives and friend's reaction? Who're they going to blame? Not you. Me!'

'I've no relatives and very few friends. So a signed affidavit from me will absolve you of all responsibility then?'

I could see him thinking. 'It's a possible line of action. Though I'd prefer....' He was thinking on his feet.

I interrupted a line of reasoning designed to fob me off. '....to vacillate until I lose interest? No. Not going to happen. I'm going to dog you as much as I would any of my fugitives. They don't get away, neither will you.'

He sat down again and began to shuffle papers. I remained silent and seated. He looked up with a decision in his mind. 'You have references, you say?'

He finally gave in, just to get rid of me. But I got a formal contract in writing with details of the bounty. It was to be for "information only" on the whereabouts of the man known as, The Magician. In the event of his trial, a portion would be paid. On the release of the sponsor, Jamison Willoughby, a further portion paid.

It was a pre-prepared contract, and when I asked how many others were on the trail he grinned at me. 'Four.' He said with satisfaction.

'Then four will be disappointed.' I grinned back.

Dealing with lawyers is always a tricky thing. Although I'd a piece of paper signed by him, could I trust him to honour that? Fuck no. My principle has always been, show me the money and I'll show you my fugitive. I'd no reason to change now.

He had little to go on. He was obliged to give out any information to any Hunter. Partly so they could have a better chance to catch the quarry. And second....the same reason. That was the only reason. No reason to hold back information. At least, I'd assume that in normal circumstance. With the slippery Levy, he might have held out on me, not wanting me to be the successful one.

But four others could be a problem. We mustn't get in each other's way. But more importantly, it was now a race.

Levy wouldn't tell me the other Hunter's names. He was not obliged to do that. I probably wouldn't know them, anyway. Levy was efficient in one area though. He had an information pack. He would give this to anyone he considered a viable Bounty Hunter. So I was reasonably assured I'd the same information as the other four.

I left his office and walked to the car park and sat in my car. It's only a neutral coloured Ford C-Max, but it suits my purpose. No one notices it in the street. So when I'm following someone it can be almost invisible. I sat inside and started to read the bumf.

The most interesting piece of information was The Magician's wife, Lucie Jagger. She was to be my target. I'd get The Magician through her. But I had to act quickly. I skimmed the reports, the interviews, the brief by Levy and another brief by Jamison Willoughby. Only one interviewee stood out. Only one mentioned the wife in any detail.

Rico Morrillo.

I'd visit him first.

CHAPTER THREE

RICO MORILLO

Where do these people come from?

A few weeks ago I had a man come in here and drug me. I nearly died. Same questions. Now more people.

I've had three people here. One yesterday and now two here, today. Knock at me door, 'Can I come in and ask you the questions?' Three people all the same question. Where is the woman called, Lucie Dern? I don't know, I say. But I ask the question, where is my money? You all look for the Lucie, do you get the money?

One of them a woman, today. Her name that of a man. Antony, something? I wouldn't use her at all in my business, too overweight and small. But two men all are the Bounty Hunters, they say. After the bounty. I thought that was MY money?

You get the money when the man called Magician is found, not before. So tell me where his wife is, and you get the money. She said that, the woman one. The other two were not so...aggressive, I think the word is. One, yesterday, again overweight was older too. What was his name, not important...Minnesota, or some such American place. How could he run around after the criminals? The last one, also today, he looked more like the hunter of bounties. He had funny name too. Cosmos?

I tell of them her last address, which is a house I own. It's no good them going there, she is not there. I would know. It's my house, I go there every day and night. The girls live there and work there. These people are stupid.

Then I think to myself, if they are stupid, I am smart. So I say to myself if they're looking for the Lucie and won't find her. Perhaps I can. I can be the Bounty Hunter. But then I think to myself where do I start looking? That is as far as I got.

But, you know, being smart is not everything. Being lucky is just as good. Better. I visit my girls every night, make sure they are ready for work and still there. Sometimes I have to be a little hard on them. But they are like sheep. If you do not keep them together and a watchful eye on them – they wander off.

So, I had a piece of the luck. I was at my house with the girls and talking to one of them outside, in the shadows. I like to instruct the girls with a little privacy, you know. I look up and who do I see walking into my house? The, Lucie Dern. With another of my girls, Sharen.

I stopped at once and pushed the girl away. I thought she was disappointed, but you never know with them. I watched outside while the two women went up the stairs. I followed and try to keep hidden. I saw they went into an empty room and wondered what they were going to do in there.

The corridors are narrow here, with eight rooms off each. I have master key and knew of one more empty room, I opened the door and went inside. I closed the door with just ajar open. I could see the door they were inside, and I waited. For millions of quids, I could be patient.

They were a long time. Sharen came out and went next door that was her room. She shut her door, and all was quiet. I waited. I did not know what to do. The money said it was for the arrest of the man, Magician. Nothing about his woman. But this Lucie must know where he was. I have a way of making the girls tell me things they do not want to. I have done it many times and know exactly what makes them tell me everything.

I knew the Lucie was alone in that room. Everyone else in this building belongs to me, will do as I say. Not interfere with my business. I opened my door and stood outside Lucie door. I listened and could hear a few movements. I pulled out my key and was about to put it in lock and the door opened.

Lucie saw me and took a second to recognise me. 'Hello, again. Long time no see you.' I said with my best smile.

I pushed her back into the room, closed and locked the door. I could see fear on her face, I like that in a woman. It was a good start for me. I looked at her luggage and realised she only had a small overnight bag and a handbag. I pulled the handbag from her and threw everything onto the bed. Lots of women rubbish, but I took the purse and phone. Nothing else worth anything.

Her hand luggage would be clothes, I could look at that afterwards.

'Rico?' she said as if I could be anyone else. Stupid woman. 'I thought you were....'

'What, you thought me, what?'

She now looked terrified. 'Leave me alone.' She almost shouted out.

I pushed her hard against the wall and leaned in very close. She smelt very nice. I could see her skin was in excellent condition. Her makeup was perfect, although she clearly didn't need much to make herself presentable to a client. She was a lot better looking than when she worked for me. None of my girls looked as good as her.

I wanted to taste that lipstick. Get her to respond to me as she used to. I wanted that so much, I nearly forgot what I was there for. Just in time I remembered.

‘Where is your man? Magician. Where is he now?’

‘Jesus, fucking Christ! Not you as well!’

I was shocked. Not at the swear, good God no. The girls are all like that, men like it and so it becomes part of their....language. No, the look in her eyes had changed. Suddenly she was not frightened anymore. I needed to change that.

In a move I practice in a long mirror, my knife appeared in my hand. The sharp point an inch from her eyes. Now the fear came back. Now I could ask the questions.

‘Where is he, or you not see him anymore? Know what I mean?’ I shoved the point of the knife into the soft spot below her right eye.

‘What man?’

‘Don’t mess the rounds with me, Lucie. We know each other too well. I have not changed although you look....softer. More...vulnerable. Where is he?’

‘If I knew who you meant, and knew where he was, I’d certainly tell you.’

I pointed to the scar on my face and said, ‘The man who did this to me. You know him. Where is he?’

I could see her pupils’ contract even more. She knew what I was talking about.

‘That could’ve been anyone, Rico. You make enemies all the time.’

I slapped her hard across the face. The bruise would not make her look prettier. ‘I have all night to keep doing this. When you have lost all your teeth, I will give you some of these.’ Again I pointed to my scar.

‘All right!’ Her head dropped in submission.

I stepped back and took a deep breath. Now we were getting somewhere.

‘Where is he?’ I said with as much menace as I could. I had played the game long enough. She wasn’t going to buy herself time anymore.

‘I’ll take you there.’

‘Tell me. I go alone.’

I could see her mind working. She was not as frightened as before, but more....beaten. She'd given in at last.

'I can describe it, but it's hard to find. You'd get lost. I'll take you there.'

'Just tell me.'

'You have me as a hostage. He is aviolent man. You'd be safer with me with you. I can assure you.'

'You do not assure me of anything. Where are we going?'

'Hampshire. A farm in Hampshire. Do you have a car?'

'Of course, I have a car. Big, powerful car.'

'Then let's go.'

She was standing up straight now. I stood back trying to think if she was trying to fool me. I was no fool. Hey, I had found her when all those Bounty people had failed. She picked up her things from the bed and slid them into the handbag. She grabbed the handle of her overnight case and looked at me.

I was still thinking. A millions quid. I had to take the risk. I held my knife against her throat and said quietly. 'None of the tricks. Or....' I made a slicing motion. She nodded slowly.

I stepped away from her and opened the door, watching her closely. I had searched her handbag and knew she had no weapon. That is unusual for a working girl. I waved for her to go out first and she pulled her case behind her. I stepped out and turned to shut the door.

A terrible pain hurt every part of my body. I was in agony. Never felt anything like it. I must have screamed loudly. But I don't remember it, for I passed out.

CHAPTER FOUR

LUCIE

When I saw Rico standing there, I thought I'd just collapse and die. Could my life get any worse?

I was struck dumb and immobile. I should've lashed out with my handbag or kicked him. Anything. But he quickly pushed me into the room.

He was wearing what he'd always worn, he never changed. Black leather trousers, red cotton T-shirt. Black Cuban heeled boots. Lots of jewellery and a gold tooth in his front upper molars.

He spoke, and I didn't hear. I could hear Jagger's warning voice. All the things he'd told me to do in such situations. All the things he told me to do to avoid these situations. The bastard was right. Again! I felt such a fool. Now a fool in a very dangerous situation. I have to stay calm, Jagger said that. Think clearly. Don't anticipate what's going to happen, just use whatever leverage you can while it's happening. Never give up. Always think.

Rico looked through my belongings and pocketing anything valuable. Right now the phone was my most valuable possession. If I could contact Jagger..... But what could he do? Nothing. He'd be too late. Could I call him so soon after leaving? What a mess I was in!

Then I realised my most valuable possession was my mind. If I could keep calm and think.....

I tried to calm myself and said, 'Rico. I thought you were....' I hesitated to say dead in case he thought I'd arranged that, and it had failed. I really thought that Jagger *had* killed Rico.

In the light of everything I've found out about Jagger's lifestyle, I'd now be more surprised if Jagger had killed Rico. But clearly, he hadn't. He'd let me believe all this time that Rico had gone for good. And yet here he was. Jagger had a great track record of saying it was all over and things still coming back to haunt us.

Rico was talking. I just told him to leave me alone, trying to be as brave as possible. Then realised, being brave against Rico is like a red rag to a bull. He liked submissiveness. I'd have to pretend submission if I was to get anywhere with this dangerous creep.

I was right, it angered him. He rammed me up against the wall very hard. I felt my head hit the wall and went slightly dizzy. He leaned his greasy face close to mine. The smell of cheap after-shave heavy in my nostrils. I thought

he would try to kiss me. A knee in the balls if he did that. But Rico didn't have balls, he was only brave in front of women.

Then he shocked me again. He wanted to know where Jagger was. Or, The Magician as he knew him. This was a change of direction. I swore at him and realised my submissiveness was slipping.

He shoved a knife into my face. This was my opportunity to look scared. Apart from the fact I WAS scared, I knew I'd have to act this one out if I was going to get out of here unharmed. I needed a plan. An exit strategy as Jagger would say.

We went through a short series of 'where is he' and 'I don't know who you mean'.

He shocked me again when he showed a scar he claimed Jagger to have given him. Why couldn't you have killed this fucking bastard, Jagger?

I couldn't resist the jibe and said he'd too many enemies for me to know who'd made that scar. He got angry again and hit me. I've been hit before and many times. You roll with it and pretend it hurts more than it does. He made another threat to redesign my face. I thought it was time. I'd shown some resistance, deflection as Jagger would call it. Time to move on with the plan to get me out of this room.

I did my best to look beaten and dejected. I think it was working as he stepped back. The threat with the knife no longer paramount. I'd decided I needed to leave this room and wouldn't let me go alone. If I could get him back to the farm. I had to trust Jagger might be there, know we were there and take care of this bastard. It was a vague plan, even a weak plan. But it was my only plan.

I had to persuade him we both had to go. It took a few attempts, but he bought it. Stupid bastard. Wait till Jagger gets you this time. I almost felt like I could pull the trigger myself. I wanted to let that thought carry me through the next few hours.

Once he'd agreed, I hurried to get on out of there. I was ready before he'd fully committed to the new plan. I was shaking as he opened the door and I walked through. If I could get into the street, there'd be people, and he'd have to behave better towards me. It was my only hope right then.

With a last threat to cut me up, he followed me out.

I was aware of someone standing outside. I thought it might be Sharen and wanted her to run away. But this was a short woman dressed in leggings and a bulky jacket. As Rico turned to close the door, she stepped forward and stabbed him.

I was facing away and turned at the hissing sound to see Rico arching back and falling to the ground. He screamed in agony and quickly stopped, and I realised he was unconscious.

‘Give me a hand, will you?’ The woman was trying to drag Rico back into the room. I dropped my bag and let go the luggage and started to pull with her.

As we struggled I looked at her. I’d never met her before and she certainly didn’t look like any working girl in this place. She was very short, quite....dumpy, I think the word is. She wore red leggings and a white, man’s shirt. She had a brown bomber jacket on, that seemed to bulge at the pockets. Tennis shoes on her feet and under them her feet were bare. Her hair fair and neatly close-cropped to her head.

She was surprisingly strong, so it was mere seconds before we’d pulled the still twitching Rico into the room and she’d shut the door.

‘Just in time, good.’ She said breathing heavily.

‘In time for what?’ I said.

‘To save you. From this....beast.’

‘I had it all in hand.’ I said getting curious and a little angry now.

‘Did you? Really? The bruise on your cheek and the slap I heard was you in control, was it?’

‘Who are you?’ I said facing up to her, looking down a little.

‘Rita. Call me Rita. Nice to meet you.....?’

‘What’re you doing here?’

‘Saving you. Not just you. All of....’ She waved a hand vaguely towards the door. ‘...you girls. You just happened to be first.’ I just stared at her, unsure what to think and what to do. Rico had stopped twitching and lay unmoving. A few moments ago I would’ve gladly seen him dead. Now I was not so sure.

‘You’re welcome.’ Rita said.

She knelt by Rico’s side and started to go through his pockets. She lay everything on the worn carpet and I watched in fascination the expert way she turned him slightly to get at the back pockets of his trousers.

‘What’re you doing here....Rita?’ I asked, thinking about my handbag and luggage still in the hall. Was it safe? Did anyone hear the screaming?

'Oh, sorry. Yes of course.' She finished the search and stood up, hand outstretched. 'Rita Wallace. Soiled Doves.'

'Soiled Doves?'

'Not heard of us, right? Okay. Few have were still quite new. An offshoot from, Fallen Angels, Hackney? No? Okay.'

'And you're here because....'

'To help you girls. The fallen angels, soiled doves. Working girls. Help youget back on track.'

I was getting riled again. 'Do I look like a working girl to you?'

She stood back with a puzzled expression on her round face. 'Now I look at you, no. But from the other side of that door, you sounded in trouble, and this is....' She waved her hand to the door again, '....a place for working girls. Or have I got any of that wrong?'

'I don't need saving.'

'Beg to differ. What's your name?'

'My bag.' I said quickly moving and opening the door. I took a quick look outside; the bag was still on the floor and the luggage with it. I picked them up and went back into the room, closing the door.

Rita sat on the bed, looking calmly at me and said, 'Are you trying to tell me you're not in any trouble? At all?'

I threw the strap of the bag over my shoulder and grabbed the handle of the overnight. 'I'm trying to tell you it's none of your business. What're you going to do about him? He's going to be fucking pissed when he wakes up. IF he wakes up. What *was* that?'

'Taser. Every woman should have one. At least one. He'll be fine. Low voltage. Fuck him if he isn't. A friend of yours?'

I glared at her and headed for the door.

'If you're running away from something....maybe I can help you. Transport, moral support, money. It's what we do at Doves.'

I looked back at her and then noticed all the money and credit cards that were beside Rico had gone. 'Where's his money gone?' I asked in an accusing way.

'Towards people like you. We need funding. Always. How can I help you?'

'By letting me go and not bothering me.'

'I could do that. But I'd feel guilty in letting my teammates down. And you too.'

I opened the door.

'I think you're in trouble and running from something. Do you think you can manage on your own? Look where you are now? Was this what you wanted? Where you wanted to be?'

I froze. Wanting to leave, but not knowing where I was going to go next.

'Is there not SOMEONE you can contact? Just one person that could give you a safe haven? Even for one night?'

Of course, there was, I was running away from him. I probably couldn't be safer. That thought was just hitting home now.

'Please call them. Make me happy I've done my job. Can you do that?'

I pulled the door closed behind me and sat on the small chair by the bed. Rita never moved or made a sound. She knew what was coming. She'd probably seen it all before.

I burst into tears.

Rita let me cry for a full minute before coming over to me and hugging me gently. She put a handful of tissues between the fingers pressed to my face. She smelt strongly of soap.

Rita moved away and sat on the bed again. She fumbled in her jacket and took out a mobile phone. 'Use this. You'll feel so much better later.'

She reached across and put it within my grasp. Had it come to this? Two nights and I was ready to go back home. She'd been the catalyst, making me realise what I was doing was pointless. I was no good on my own. I would've walked out of here and into the streets. Walked for hours, maybe found another hotel. But very shortly I knew I'd be making the same decision as I was doing right now. I took the phone.

Jagger had a phone that was for our emergencies only. I used it once by mistake and he got a little angry. No, not angry. He doesn't get angry. But he was clear in making the point it was for emergencies only. I dialled the number he'd made me memorise.

'I'll drive you home.' Rita said. I shook my head. 'Of course, I will. You're in a state. It'll be safer. The car's outside.'

The phone rang for some time. Where was he? He could be anywhere, doing anything. He might not even have the phone on him. I was about to press the cancel button when there was a breathless, 'Lucie?'

‘Jag? Oh, God!’

The tears started, and I couldn’t talk. Rita eased the phone out of my hand and murmured into it.

‘Hello. I don’t know you, but I have your wife here and I think she’d like to go home now. Hello...are you there? Yes, okay....Rita. Yes, she is. Right beside me. I don’t think she can talk. Okay. I will. Hang on.’ She moved towards me holding the phone towards me.

‘Just tell him you’re all right. He thinks you’re in some sort of trouble. At least that’s what it sounds like to me.’

‘Jag?’ I managed between heaves of breathing and crying. ‘I’m okay. I just...want to come home now.’

His voice was calm as always. ‘I’ll come and pick you up. Where are you?’

I was stifling the tears a little better now. ‘My old stamping ground. How dumb is that? Rico found me.’ I could hear the tension at the other end. ‘But Rita here sorted him out. He’s no bother. Yes, I can’t remember this address. Rita knows it. Rita?’ I passed the phone to her.

‘Hello. Look don’t worry. My car’s outside. She’ll be home quicker if I drove her. Hello....? Yes. Alright. What’s the address? Yes....of course, she should. I’ll see you shortly. I will.’

She handed the phone back to me. Jagger said, ‘Come back to Battersea. I’ll be waiting for you. So glad you called. I’ve been worried. I love you.’

This brought the tears rushing to the surface again. I managed to say the same and Rita took the phone out of my hands, now too busy stopping the flow of tears.

She ended the call and looked around the room. She took hold of the overnight and stood beside me. ‘Better go before this fucker wakes up.’

I nodded and stood up. Hefted the bag over my shoulder and opened the door. She was behind me and closed it. We walked towards the main stairway. I stopped.

‘Sharen!’

‘Who?’ she said.

‘Sharen. My friend, Sharen. We can’t go without her.’ I moved and knocked on her door quietly.

Rita came close to me and whispered, ‘We can’t take her as well. We just need to get you home.’

I looked at the concern on her face and said, 'She's my friend. I can't let her stay here with.....' I pointed to the closed door behind which was Rico.

'You can come back when you're feeling your old self. Bring your husband with you for support. Let's go. He'll be waiting.'

'No.' I was becoming difficult and knew it. I tried the handle; the door was locked. I knocked again and said, 'Sharen. It's me, Lucie. Open up.'

I heard movement inside and the lock sounded. It was a second or two before the door opened slightly and I could see an eye watching me. The door opened wider and Sharen looked at me with obvious fear in her eyes.

'Lucie. You all right?'

'Sure.' I said and hugged her.

She started to cry and tried to speak at the same time. 'I heard Rico's voice. I heard screaming. I was frightened. Too frightened to'

'It's all right. You're coming with me. Come on. Quickly before Rico rises from Hell.'

'Who's she?' Sharen said holding back.

'A friend.' I said. 'Of us both.'

'Where are we going?' Sharen said with a vagueness. I could see her eyes faintly in the dim corridor light. She'd taken something, God knows what.

I grabbed her arm and started to walk. 'Somewhere very safe. A new life for you and, I hope, me.'

Rita's car was a small people carrier. She insisted I sat up front next to her and we slid the unresisting Sharen in the back. My overnight went in beside her and very quickly we were on our way.

'Where to, Lucie?'

We were already at the first crossroads and I had to concentrate. 'Battersea.' She nodded and turned left. I looked at Sharen behind, who was already falling asleep with the motion of the car. Helped by chemicals no doubt. A thought struck me.

'How did you know my name was, Lucie? I didn't tell you?'

Rita smiled and said, 'No, you wouldn't tell me. But you called out your name to your friend back there to get her to open the door. At least now we've both been formally introduced. Hi.'

'You knew I had a husband, too?' I was rambling a little now, the adrenaline leaving my body.

‘I just guessed. Hoped really. They’re normally the best – or worst - support in these cases, I find.’

‘So why would someone from...Soiled Doves want to help me?’

‘I happened to be there. I need to see the job through. I’ll dump you off and go back and save more souls. It’s what I do.’

She concentrated on the tricky turns of central London and headed for south of the river.

I found myself dozing off and awoke with a start. I realised I hadn’t slept much for the last night in the hotel.

‘Where in Battersea?’ Rita asked quietly.

‘I’ll direct you.’ I said leaning forward to see better.

I found the house and opened the car door. Sharen was fast asleep in the back. ‘Leave her be.’ Rita said, ‘Let’s get you reunited with your husband, Jag? What’s that stand for?’

I was still trying to wake up, and a thought struck me. I hadn’t taken an evasive route to get here; I came straight here. If we were being followed.....If I was driving I would’ve been more careful. I stopped and looked around, up and down the street. It was early afternoon and already getting dark. I could see no cars following. I looked at the house, there were lights on upstairs and one downstairs in the living room. It was a dark house, even during the day and always needed some lights on. At least Jag would be pleased to see me. I hoped.

I slipped the key into the lock, thankful I’d kept my key and not left it with the note. Perhaps subconsciously I knew I’d be back soon, never imagined this soon though - less than forty-eight hours! I wondered if Jag had time to miss me? Or had he even been back to read the note? Then I remembered, over the phone, he said he’d missed me.

I opened the door, and the hallway was dark. I turned on the switch and the lights didn’t come on.

‘Jag!’ I said. No reply.

I walked down the corridor with Rita several steps behind me, dragging my overnight. I walked into the living room and the lights were on, but no one there. I turned to speak to Rita, and she’d gone. I walked back down the corridor and heard a bump come from the kitchen. I hurried and looked through the doorway. Rita was lying on the lino, unconscious. Jag was standing over her looking at me.

‘What do you think you’re doing, Luce?’ I could tell he was angry. His eyes were wide, and his lips set in a straight line.

‘What’ve you done to her? Not....killed her?’ I said in mounting horror.

‘No. Just a nerve hold. She’ll be out for about an hour. Let’s go. She may not be alone.’ He started to go through the pockets of her jacket and threw items onto the floor. The Taser gun, some plastic handcuffs. Pepper spray. A clasp knife and her wallet he held on to.

He found my purse and phone and with a grimace handed them back to me. I watched him rifle through her wallet and pulled out a card which he grimly handed to me.

It was a business card. It said, ‘Toni Moss. Bounty and Repatriation Officer.’

‘She’s a Bounty Hunter after me, Luce. And you brought her right here.’

I was staggered. ‘I didn’t.....’

‘What were you thinking?’

I was shaking my head. My knees were giving way and suddenly he was holding me tight. His arms around me, his lips on my neck. I could feel his hot breath coming in gasps.

‘I was so worried. As soon as you called, I knew there was a problem. I just wish you’d.....’ He squeezed even tighter. ‘But we must go. Come on.’

In a daze I was led out of the door, turning off the lights as he did so. He turned the upstairs lights off from the repeater switches by the front door. He took one look around and helped me outside.

The front garden was only a few steps to a gate that didn’t exist anymore. We turned left and came to a car I recognised as one of his. He opened the door for me and I started to get in.

‘Sharen!’ I said and ran back up the road.

He caught up with me and said, ‘What are you doing. Get in the car. There could be others, any minute!’

I brushed him off and ran to Rita’s car. Rita, Toni, whatever the bitch’s name was. I yanked open the back door and tried to wake Sharen.

‘Who the hell is *she*?’ Jagger said looking in.

‘My friend of a long time ago. You probably met her once. I said I’d help her. She’s coming with us, Jag.’

‘No she’s not!’ he said pulling me away.

'I can't just leave her!' I said my voice louder than I expected.

'Okay. I'll take care of her. She can stay here, in the house, for tonight. I need to get both of us away and we'll come back tomorrow and decide what to do with her, okay?'

My mind was in turmoil. When he said he'd take care of her, did he mean....no!

'Give me your house keys, quickly. Are you all right?' He seemed sincere.

I nodded and fumbled in my bag and found the key ring. Jagger took it and eased me to one side. He half dragged Sharen out of the car and hefted her onto his shoulder. He half ran towards the house and I stumbled after him. Jagger opened the front door and hurried into the living room and laid Sharen gently on the sofa, putting a pillow under her head.

I stood and looked at my long-time friend fast asleep. Not knowing where she was, or why. Jagger hurried into the kitchen and came back with a handful of Rita's money. He quickly found an envelope and pushed it at me with a pen.

'Write this....stay as long as you like. Buy food. Stay in the house otherwise. Be back tomorrow. Lucie. Hurry.'

He fidgeted while I scrawled the note and handed it back to him. He pushed the money and keys into the envelope and stuffed it down her bra.

'What about Rita....Toni....what's her face?'

He thought a moment and went back into the kitchen. He found her car keys in a pocket and stuffed those down her bra.

'Let's hope she takes the hint. Come on. Let's go home.'

CHAPTER FIVE

TONI

What the fuck happened!

I was lying on the hard lino floor of the kitchen of some dump, somewhere...Battersea was it? I tried to get up but couldn't. A pain shot down from my right shoulder and I was creased in agony until it slowly subsided. I tried again and got to my feet. My head was swimming, and I was trying to remember what the fuck had happened?

It came back piecemeal. I stood and held onto the counter until the dizziness stopped and the pain eased further. I was remembering. The quarry, Lucie, where was she? I stumbled into the corridor and it was still pitch black. I found a light switch and tried it, nothing. I went into another room and tried the light; it came on, almost blinding me.

This was a sitting room, of sorts, very small and basic. Lying on the small couch was a woman. My brain churned, Sharen? I went over to her and could see her breathing. A quiet snore was the only sound in the room, she was sound asleep.

I went back into the hall and tried the light again. Nothing. I looked up to see the bulb was missing. I remember following Lucie into the house and deciding to take a quick search to see who was there. I remember going into the kitchen looking for the light switch and feeling someone next to me. No smell, no aftershave, just a presence. I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder and then I woke up.

Turning on the kitchen lights I saw some of my things on the countertop. Someone had gone through all my pockets. I don't carry a handbag; it gets in the way if you've got to give chase. All my paraphernalia was there, my money was missing. And my car keys. The bastard had robbed me.

Then I felt something that shouldn't be there. I stuck my fingers down my bra to find the car keys. Had he left my money somewhere too? I did a quick search of my clothing to find nothing.

Bastard!

I should be grateful I had the keys and my phone, I suppose. He could've killed me. Knowing his reputation I wouldn't have been surprised. But...his wife was here, Lucie. Does she have an effect on his actions? Interesting line of thought.

Memory was returning. Something about...a bug. Yes, I'd planted a bug in Lucie's overnight bag, in a small pocket while I was wheeling it out the

door for her. My phone! I made the connection and soon had the tracking map on the small screen. There was a blip, but it was getting to the extreme range now, that meant about ten miles. They were ten miles away and heading out of London. I had to move fast if I was to keep them on my screen.

I grabbed all my possessions and started stuffing them into their correct pockets as I hurried out the door. I left all the lights on, Sharen would need the light to get around when she woke up. She needed to find her way to the front door to go back to work.

Hurrying out to the car I was relieved to find it still there. I started the beast and propped the phone on the little holder on the dashboard. I drove quickly, eager to catch them up. The London traffic had delayed them long enough for me to wake up, now the same London traffic was going to hold me up. Letting them get out of range.

I realised the rush hour was now nearly over and I could hope to gain a bit. On the map, it looked like they were heading for the A3 and out of London. If I lost them, I'd drive along the A3 and hope to pick up a signal if they were within ten miles of it. If not, I'd lost them.

As I drove, I could feel the anger building inside of me. What an absolute fucking idiot I'd been. One moment preening and praising myself for getting one target to lead me directly to the main target, the next for not being careful with the primary target. He had me. Fooled me and tricked me. I was angry.

I dialled Ryan, my on-off boyfriend and hoped he was available. He picked up after the second ring.

'Babes. You must need something?'

'Not necessarily. How are you too? I'm fine thanks. What happened to a good old chit chat?'

'It went out the window the day I met you, Tone. What can I do for you? You only phone when you want help or.....recreation.'

'Bastard!'

'That's better, now I know you're not an impostor.'

'Nerve holds. What do you know about them?'

'Nothing. Why?'

'Just had one.'

I could hear an intake of breath. 'Are you...all right?'

‘Fine. Fucking painful though. I need to know what kind of person would know how to do that? Can do?’

‘I’ll check it out with a few of my army buddies. They might know. You sure you’re all right?’

‘Fine. Thanks. Sorry for the...you know. But I am busy.’

‘You take care. Be careful. I don’t like it when you put yourself in danger.’

‘I promise. Call me back when you know something. Okay?’

‘Sure. When will I see you?’

‘Let me sort this out first. A couple of days. We’ll get together. If all goes well here, I’ll buy you an expensive dinner.’

‘Sounds like a deal. But please....be careful.’

‘Okay. Later.’ I broke off the connection before he got into the ‘I love you’ bit and I had to respond. Or he would say ‘don’t you love me’ and round it would go. I wasn’t in the mood for that now.

After a very short while I realised they were heading for the only other address Levy had given me. They were aiming for their marital love nest in Hampshire. I relaxed a little at that knowledge. They didn’t know bloody-minded Moss was right behind them.

Even with the sat nav it took me over half an hour to find the farm from the nearest town. It was dark, few street lights and then I ran out of streets. Hard to call some of these places’ roads, more tarmacked tracks.

I found what looked like a narrow lane that ran up to the main farm entrance. I drove past and looked for somewhere to park. I passed a parked car that had taken the only slight widening in the road, I looked for the next. I found a minimum gap and tried to ease the C-Max into it. Now I wished I had a smaller car. I parked it and sat for a moment to think what to do next.

By rubbing life back into my shoulder I realised the pain was definitely easing. I pulled out some painkillers I always keep on me and swallowed them using a bottle of water I had in the door pocket. I turned on the car’s interior light and pulled out the material Levy had given me. I started to read it. Something caught my attention, it sounded like gunfire. I listened. More shots.

I turned off the lights and got out of the car and listened. Silence. Was I mistaken? I got back in the car and was about to switch the light back on when I heard another sound. A...car. I looked in my mirror and saw nothing.

Suddenly the car sped past me and all its headlights came on. He was in a hurry for sure. I listened. There was no more noise in the countryside.

I decided I had to do something. At least take a look at the building, see how easy it would be to get in. I turned my phone to silent vibrate and checked I'd everything I needed. I never carry a gun, mainly because it would be illegal, also, it invites violence. I use pepper spray and a Taser to protect myself. I'm not even sure if the Taser is legal yet. But, as long as I have those, I feel confident.

Switching on my torch I walked back up the lane. I turned up the track and put my hand over the beam so that it shone downwards only. By now my eyes had adjusted to the low light and I could see quite well. Up ahead I saw some gates and beyond it a house. Dark and unoccupied? I thought different. I was sure The Magician and Mrs Magician were in there somewhere and I was going to sniff them out.

I started to climb over the gate.

CHAPTER SIX

JAGGER GILCHRIST

For most of my life, I'd lived on my own. For a brief time, I enjoyed the company of the woman I love. Now....I'm alone again.

Do I blame myself? Absolutely. Could I have done anything differently? Yes. I could have killed a few more people. That way they wouldn't come back and haunt me, ruining my life.

When I came home to find just a note and a wedding ring on top of it I.....felt pain. I'm not a man that feels that kind of pain. For many years all emotion had to be eradicated from my life. No emotion, no over-reaction and nothing could influence the prime motivation of my job. Eliminating bad people.

As I lived alone, there were none of the usual emotional ties normal people have in their lives. As Lucie has said several times – I'm not normal. But recently I've tried to be more *normal*. And look where it's got me!

I tried to break free and put all my past behind me. But they wouldn't let me. One by one they crawled out from under their stones and came at me. Came at both of us. All this has to stop. I've tried many ways to stop it and all have worked, up to a point. But as each head was cut from the monster, the monster grew another. How do I kill the monster when I'd decided not to kill again?

I sat in our tiny bedroom of my two up and two down safe house in Battersea and tried to rationalise what I thought. My wife had left me because she thought it would be too dangerous to stay. That's what the note said. Was it true? Was I the reason she left? Did I not give her the life she wanted? Needed.

I trained for years not to beat myself up with thoughts of *wanna, coulda, shoulda*. But this was different. This was someone I....loved. I never thought I could feel that emotion or admit it to anyone. Not even myself. But that's the change she's brought to my life. I liked that change. I wanted it back.

But how?

I peeled off my disguise and forced my mind into the now, not the past, or future. I'd just been posing in one of my alter-egos of Tea Michigan. A weak anagram of The Magician, but stick with what works, I say.

The first was the weasel lawyer Jacob Levy. I knew I'd not get to see him by just walking in, so I used my old nemesis, Jamison Willoughby, to get me through the door. Levy was easy to contact, and the mention of his high-

profile client Willoughby would get his attention. I asked him to check with Willoughby if I was worthy of a private interview with regard to me finding The Magician. Which was, after all, the prime reason they'd posted a multimillion-pound reward for the capture of the elusive villain.

Willoughby was all for it. I could almost hear the excitement coming through Levy. Willoughby thought I was the foremost expert on The Magician. I should be. I *was* The Magician. I was trying to kill the trickster off, but nobody would let him die.

I'd met Willoughby in several disguises over the last few months and Michigan was probably the best one that Willoughby would respond to right now. A long list of charges against him including murder and manslaughter were not going to go away. He believed the capture and trial of The Magician would help his case, so did Levy. Michigan was the self-proclaimed hunter of The Magician for over ten years and had the largest database on the invisible man.

So I was ushered into the lawyer's inner sanctum with celebrity status.

I was offered coffee, which I declined. I never like to touch anything when I'm incognito. Not that I leave any prints because I have some especially made ultra-thin skin coloured rubber gloves. They go unnoticed by all but the closest inspections and leave no prints. But I don't want to leave DNA on the coffee cups from my lips. You can't be too careful. I've remained a free man because of my obsessive precautions.

Levy wanted to small talk, but I was in a hurry. 'I understand you've increased the bounty on The Magician, Mr Levy. Why?'

He shrugged as if it was obvious. 'We can't get hold of him any other way. Why are you surprised, Mr Michigan?'

'Not surprised, disappointed. As I told Mr Willoughby when we met, I thought it a total waste of your time. However, he went his own way on that issue. Now, what results have you had so far?'

'None. But it's early days.'

'Response? Have you had any clue as to how many people are trying to find The Magician?'

He sat back and looked at me carefully. 'May I ask why you want to know, Mr Michigan?'

'I want to know because it affects me greatly. For over ten years I've hunted this man. Came very close to catching him on several occasions. I need to know if people are going to get in my way, muddy the waters. I'm sure you can understand that, Mr Levy?'

He spread his hands and sat right back in his high-backed chair. ‘Surely the more people looking, the more chance of catching him? I’m sure you can understand that, Mr Michigan?’

I leant forward and lowered my voice. ‘Not with The Magician, they don’t stand a chance. You should be aware of the responsibility that’s yours alone should they get harmed in any way. Killed even. The man will not hesitate to kill anyone in his way. I’m sure you can understand *that*, Mr Levy.’

His eyes narrowed and knew I had a point. But he was only following client instructions. Blame Willoughby later if it all went wrong.

‘The people after him are...professionals, Mr Michigan. I made sure of that.’

‘How many, “professionals”?’

‘A total of four. To date.’

‘Make it five. I have to throw my hat into the ring here. What new information do you have to give me?’

I could see he was almost pleased I was suddenly on his side. He knew Willoughby would be pleased too. He couldn’t wait to hand me a prepared package of everything that was known about The Magician.

‘I hope some of this information will be new to you. On a personal note, I would hope it was you that found him. After all your diligent work over the years.’

I smiled ruefully at him before saying, ‘If the Magician is arrested, I’ll certainly not be expecting to collect the bounty.’ Little did he know how true that statement was, or the irony behind it.

‘May I have a list of the Bounty Hunters interested? Just so I don’t step on toes, or they don’t step on mine.’

He had to think for a second, then made a decision. From a drawer, he pulled out a yellow folder and flipped through the few papers.

‘I have someone who calls himself, Cruz. This crazy person Cruz wants an option to bring back The Magician dead. I told him no, obviously. A woman, of all things, named Toni Moss. Another weird name, Hawk. Looks a little like that too. Kyle Wilber....oh. Sorry.’ He removed the paper and slid it across his desk and carried on reading. ‘And last, but not least, someone calling themselves, Nomos. Crazy people, as you said. Says here....he claims it’s a Greek legend meaning....Bringer of Law. So that’s how he sees himself. He didn’t look Greek to me. More....normal.’

‘All these people expect to be paid the bounty if they find The Magician?’

‘If any of them do, yes. On his arrest, then a trial, then the release of Mr Willoughby.’

‘And you think all those things are going to happen?’

‘That’s what I’m working towards, Mr Michigan.’

‘Good luck with that lot.’ I said with a smile.

‘It’s a real chore dealing with these odious people.’

I said, ‘They’re as far away in lifestyle from you, as you are from them. It takes all sorts...two to Tango. You need them, they need you. To them, you may be just as odious.’

I stood up, I had everything I came for this time. ‘Thank you, Mr Levy. Send my regards to, Mr Willoughby.’

He stood too and held out his hand. I was just far enough away to avoid shaking it. I thought I might get a disease from this man. I walked towards the door when Levy said, ‘Of course. Those are only the ones that wanted to register with me, so they can claim the reward quickly when the time came. We don’t know how many others are out there, professional or otherwise, who’ll be after The Magician. Do we?’

‘We don’t.’ I said. ‘That’s the most frightening part.’

I sat and re-read Lucie’s letter many times, allowing my mind to work its way around the problem. It didn’t. So I distracted myself and read all the material Levy had given me. To my surprise, the names of Rico and József glared out at me.

Why was I surprised, they’d met me before? Not in my normal form, but disguised. Rico...I thought I’d made it clear to him to leave the city, county, or even the planet. I might have to pay him a visit again. Which disguise did I use? It was ...seven years ago?

József’s name reminded me of Olga and her family and all that business with the farm in Hungary. I must get in contact with them again when this was all over.

I threw the folder on the table and stared at the letter. I picked up the ring and rubbed it between my fingers. I desperately wanted to see it back on her finger, and me holding her hand. But where to start?

I regarded myself as an expert tracker, but when it comes to someone, that’s close to you it’s that much harder to know where to start. To begin with, I’d known Lucie for nearly ten years. But only these last few months did I know her to really talk to. I realised I knew very little about her at all.

All I had to go on was her old haunts and the flat I'd set her up in. Although the flat was still there, and I still paid for it, she wouldn't be stupid enough to go back there, would she? I had to be sure.

Then there was Rico. He claimed his current address was the same as the one Lucie used to work out of. She wouldn't be stupid enough to go back there. Especially if Rico was still around. But then, she wouldn't know about Rico. She thinks he's gone for good. Because I told her so! Am I going to get anything right ever again?

I felt I had to do something. It was nearly midnight and yet I had to do something. I would visit both premises and see what I could find. I found a photo of Lucie and stuck it in my jacket pocket.

I didn't take any weapons as I didn't expect trouble.

What else could I do?

I got back later the following morning. I'd spent most of the night walking the streets of Lucie's old stamping ground. I realised all along I was wasting my time. But I'd no other ideas. Had I deteriorated to this, useless at tracking? It really was time to retire permanently.

I found Lucie's address book. It was well hidden, but at least I'm good at finding inanimate objects. I'd told her to destroy it, it would be dangerous if it got into the wrong hands. But there are certain things she wanted to hang on to from her past life. I suppose I can't blame her. But at least put all the information on a digital database and make it secure.

There were hundreds of names and numbers. Who could I ring? All of them, no. Some of them, but which ones? I picked a few female names at random and asked if they'd seen Lucie recently. Some were puzzled, some wanted to know who I was? What could I say to that? Husband I said. Some laughed, others expressed surprise. One or two hung up. I was getting nowhere.

For another twenty-four hours, I tried calling people and even went back to walk the streets again. Nothing. Return to Battersea and hope she'd seen sense and come home. It was all I could do.

I made myself some lunch although I wasn't hungry. I sat on the only comfy chair in the sitting room and let my mind run around the problem. I closed my eyes to help.

My emergency mobile woke me up with a bang.

'Jag? Oh, God!'

My relief was overwhelming. She was crying and then another voice came onto the phone. My relief swept away like a flash flood. My heart did go cold. I quickly pulled myself together and remembered all the training I've had over the years.

This was now a hostage situation.

I threw a few quick questions at her about Lucie's health, state of mind, physical condition. The woman seemed surprised. It took a few seconds for me to realise that this was not a hostage call. The woman seemed concerned and eager to get Lucie back home. I wanted to speak to Lucie again to confirm this.

She did. She said she wanted to come home, and that made me very pleased. Her voice sounded upset, but not under duress. There were none of our code words for danger. Still, I wanted to be careful. I just needed to know where she was and come and get her. Give her a time later than I could arrive and take her and the stranger by surprise.

They mentioned the name, Rico. I immediately regretted not going straight round there once I knew he was involved. I would've found her - if he could. Then she said the stranger, Rita, had helped her. I began to feel easier about the situation now.

When Rita came on the phone, she was insistent on driving Lucie home. I now thought on several levels. All of them were concerned about us being compromised. That had already happened, now it was damage limitation.

I didn't want her to go to the farm. That was still the most secure refuge we had even if every Bounty Hunter on Levy's list would know about it. I was already at the house in Battersea, so I suggested she drove there. I needed a look at this Rita...just to be sure.

Lucie came on the phone and sounded relieved. She wasn't a hostage, I could be reasonably sure of that now. I needed her to relax and behave normally. I would take care of the rest.

I told her I loved her and meant it. Now I had to prove it.

For the rest of my life.

I was watching through a darkened curtain when the car arrived. She had trouble finding somewhere to park in the crowded street. I eased back into the shadows and watched as they got out of the car.

Rita appeared quite short and a little overweight. She had on a jacket with many pockets, probably why she wasn't carrying a handbag. She pulled

Lucie's carry-on luggage bag out of the rear of the car and they were coming towards the house.

I slipped downstairs and decided to wait in the kitchen. The first place they would go would be the sitting room, I hoped. So I left the light on in there but took out the bulb in the hallway. I heard the key in the lock and eased back into the deeper shadows.

Lucie walked past, straight into the sitting room where I'd left the light on. I wanted to wait until Rita had moved past then get behind her. I was surprised to see a movement from the darkened hallway and the short woman come into the kitchen.

I'd decided on a simple disguise, so I used just a wig and glasses. So I couldn't let her put a light on. I reacted quickly and without much thought, as I'd been trained to do, many years ago. The nerve hold is not easy to do. You have to get just the right spot and squeeze very hard. That's what causes the bruising and pain later. She slumped to the ground before I could catch her.

Lucie heard it and rushed in, turning on the light.

I was so angry with her I had to say something. 'What do you think you're doing, Luce?' I could've said it louder, with more venom, or with more cursing. But that's how it came out.

She seemed more concerned about the woman on the floor. I was more concerned with getting away quickly. Rita could have others following her. I started to search her pockets. As the tools of the trade started coming out I became more and more convinced, I'd been right to be suspicious. When I found her card, and it said, Toni Moss, it confirmed she was a Bounty Hunter. Or, "Bounty and Repatriation Officer" as she liked to call herself.

Lucie looked about to collapse. This became all too much for her, the emotional roller coaster was taking its toll. I held her close and felt every inch of her body against mine. It felt so good. It couldn't last, and I was still in a hurry. I pulled away.

I pushed her towards the door and began to turn out the lights. We were nearly out of there before she decided her friend Sharen was more important than our safety. It's no use arguing with her when she gets a bee in her bonnet, who says that anymore? I gave in quickly because I knew I would eventually, and this at least might save us some time. I carried the sleeping girl into the sitting room and laid her gently on the couch. She looked ill rather than asleep. But I didn't have time to worry about her now.

My mind was back up to speed now and knew what needed to be done. Pacify Lucie and get her out of there as quickly as possible. I decided on a

quick remedy to look after Sharen and involved Lucie in its progress. She wrote a note, and we left it, money and house keys.

Again, Lucie showed concern for Moss and I found her car keys and stuffed them down her top. Let's hope she realised running away was *her* best option now.

I always ensure there's nothing left in the house to incriminate us. So we can always leave at a moment's notice. I'd made doubly sure of that while I was waiting for the two women to arrive.

On our way out of the house, I walked quickly to Moss's car and planted a bug under the rear wheel arch. I could now know when the car was within five miles of us.

Time to go home. At last.

Lucie was quiet on the drive down to Hampshire. It took nearly two hours, and it was dark when we got there. On entry I'm always cautious and checked all the alarms and traps I'd set. That took nearly five minutes before we could feel safe in our own home again. I re-set all the alarms and had time to see to Lucie.

I held her for a long time in silence.

'I'm sorry.' Was said quietly and obviously after some reflection.

'Nothing to be sorry about. It's me that ought to be sorry. I just wish....you'd told me about this before....you know.'

'You wouldn't have let me go. And I thought it was the best thing. The only thing.'

I had to be careful here, so I said, 'And do you *still* think that?' She shook her head and buried her face into my shoulder. The tears were coming again. I hate that. I can't handle it.

'It's already in the past. Time to move on.'

She looked up at me and said, 'Move on? Leave, again?'

I tried to smile. 'Change of plan. If you're agreeable. We stay here and defend ourselves on our own turf.'

'Like you did with that Wilber man?'

I nodded. 'I need you with me always. That way, I feel we'll both be safer. So you see...you were right. Just...possibly....the wrong action to take in proving it.'

The tears had stopped, but her face was far from calm yet. ‘Jag. I need you to promise me something.’

‘If I can.’

‘You can. Just....tell me what’s going on. Not knowing is *more* of a worry than knowing. You do understand, don’t you?’ I nodded. ‘If I knew what’s going on, then I’d have as much confidence as you, that everything’s going to be all right. Understand?’

I nodded. Not sure at all. Now was not the time to question her logic. ‘When did you eat last?’ She shook her head as if confused. ‘Or drink?’ She looked at me with a faint smile now.

I hugged her and gave her a kiss. ‘Have a shower and I’ll get something to eat ready for us. Cup of tea? Sound good?’ She nodded. I turned her towards the stairs and shoved her gently up them.

By the time she had showered and changed she looked better, beautiful in fact. I had a tray ready with toast and scrambled eggs. A pot of tea and a cruet set.

‘Where’re you going with that?’ she said with a smile on her face.

‘Safe room. We need to keep the place dark at night. We don’t want anyone to know we’re here.’

Her face had dropped. I felt guilty at busting whatever bubble was left in her mind. ‘We’re no better off than before, are we? Worse, in fact!’ she said on the point of tears again.

I sighed, ‘Come on. Let’s just treat this as a picnic for now. Decide what to do for the best afterwards. Come on. Open the doors for me, please.’

I’d made several changes to the safe room over the last few months. I was becoming aware of its importance to our survival. It was more comfortable now. In fact, it had the best of our furniture in it. It had a TV, DVD and radio. Books and a decent double bed.

Essentially just a cellar, it had reinforced walls and a thick steel door. A self-contained ventilation unit and a backup power supply run from a generator hidden in a barn outside. It also had a mass of new security. One large screen showed all the CCTV camera inputs from all around the house.

We ate in silence. I saw Lucie looking up at the screens occasionally, realising this was part of our lives now, looking over our shoulders.

She finished her meal and drank her tea. She sat back on the easy chair and looked at me. ‘I thought you’d got rid of Rico?’

‘I did.’

'Well, he's back. You said he wouldn't be.'

'Our lives are full of bad pennies. Would you prefer if I'd killed him?'

'A while ago, no. Now, yes. Definitely.'

'Would you like me to go and kill him now? I could go right now and be back in a few hours?'

She shook her head. 'Rita sorted him out. He'll be quiet for a while.'

'You mean, Toni Moss, the Bounty Hunter. The one who was trying to capture me and get a few million pounds? Getting at me by conning you? *That* Rita?'

She looked away. I'm sure she felt guilty, and it did no good me rubbing it in. 'She would've fooled me too, Luce.' I said with downcast eyes.

'No she wouldn't.'

We were quiet again and I could see Lucie thinking over her recent experiences. When she finally spoke it was so quiet I had to move nearer to hear her.

'It was a horrible experience reliving those bad times again, Jag. I used to walk those streets before you came along and took me away from them. I feel I want to do the same. Those women need help, we can help them, can't we? Starting with Sharen.'

A beeping sound came from the monitor. We both looked at it.

'Someone's climbed our fence.'

'What the fuck now!' Lucie said with dread in her voice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CRUZ

Do you know what pisses me off? Everything.

When I have high expectations, I expect gratification. Who doesn't? But these days, who gives a shit about levels of service and value for money? No one.

I try my best to be patient and give everyone a chance to give me what I expect but does that happen often enough?

No!

Like the Lawyer crud, Levy. He took an instant dislike to me. Why? Because I'm foreign. I know his type. Quick to judge. Books and their covers. All that crap. Hell, I hated him too. He knew that as well.

To look at me you can see I'm a nice guy. Sure I have a dress style that not everyone goes for. But it is style, my friend. Not victims of the fashion machine. Women wearing the McCartneys and Jimmy the Shoes. Because "someone" said they had to wear.

I like my look. My cowboy boots, £3,000. Not Jimmy the Shoes. Handmade, matching snakeskin belt too. Leather vest, black, of course. Black leather trousers, you have to, right? Black silk shirt and western tie. Black again. Yes, right, black. Underwear you ask? Tommy Hilfiger. My concession to fashion is only based on comfort. I like comfort. Yes, black too.

I didn't like, Levy. Gave me attitude all the time. Credentials he wanted. What's with the credentials? Can I do the job, yes? Have I done this before, yes? Ten dead people in the ground. Of course, I've done this before.

Bounty Hunting is not legal in the UK. However, rewards can be offered for information. To prove that information, sometimes you have to make contact with the target. If you have contact, then you can make a citizen's arrest and take them to the police. That's if you're inclined to. To "find" a body is not illegal. You can claim self-defence, but not *too* often. Sometimes I've used 'he was dead when I got there'. But you can't use that every time.

I stood over the geek and slapped down my business card. I smiled as he read it. It's always satisfying to see people's reactions. 'Have Gun, Can Travel'. He almost smiled and handed the card back to me. I threw it back at him.

Only then, as I began to make him nervous, did he offer me a folder. Information Pack he called it. Pathetic details is what I call it. You see? No

one gives proper service anymore. That's all I have to work on, almost nothing!

He didn't want to tell me who else was on this case. Three so far, he eventually said. I had to let go of his tie then. I felt that I might be going a little too far. After all, this was the guy that was going to pay me millions. I would rough him up later if he struggled to pay me.

I saw the relief in his face as I left the office. I got looks from his staff outside too. Had I made that much noise? Did I care? 'Course not.

Only one place to start, last known address. So I hit the road and powered on with my new Mustang GTO. Five litre V8 with all the trimmings. Black, of course. I had the roof up as it was getting into autumn now and I just relaxed to the sound of the twin exhausts and Garth Brooks. Just on the too loud side. I took the Petersfield exit off the A3 and concentrated on the sat nav.

I rent on the South Coast, so this is new territory to me here. Looks a nice place. But I love the country, anyway. I found Clanfield and started to look for the address. It was hard to find. The Post Code was no help.

It took another half hour, and I was getting angry now. Why can't the British signpost everything properly? I found the track that I thought might lead up to the house and left the car on the side of the road. It has all the latest security systems, so I pitied the bastard that tried to steal it.

From out of a hidden compartment under the dashboard I pulled out my Sig and slipped it into my belt. Even after a quick read of this dude's details, I knew he might be a handful. But then, he'd never met me, yet.

The info stated very clearly that this man was wanted alive. Be that as it may, but if the fucker started shooting at me, I was going to shoot back! If he was dead when I got him back, I'd argue my case. Until then, I would be patient, for a while. I would try to keep him alive for questioning.

As I walked up the drive, I began to realise I was wasting my time. From the small amount I'd read it seemed that this was the place he was attacked in before. And he got away. Why would he still be here? I shrugged. There might be something inside that should lead me to him. There usually was.

He most likely high-tailed it out of the house and left everything behind. I would see.

It was getting to dusk, and I thought I'd hang around until it was dark. I went back to the car and sat to wait. I read the rest of the material. I whistled through my teeth when I was reading all about this Magician guy. Talk about a hitman. There were over forty cases that were linked to him. Never ever seen, caught, or even a sniff of who he was. This was going to be

a tad more difficult than I thought. I had to make sure I had the right man. But how would I really know?

Using my satellite phone I opened Google Earth to study the ground from the air. This place was a fortress. There were no paths, roads, or tracks other than the main one up to the house. It was supposed to be a farm, but all I saw was one big old house surrounded by solid fencing, alarmed no doubt too, and nature's natural boundaries.

From the trunk I lifted out my rucksack with all my equipment in it. I pulled it into place on my back and set off back up the road. I approached the gate slowly, inched my way along its side and along the fence that went all around the property. Once into denser bushes I tested the fence and found it was not electrified. I understand that to be illegal in this country. For once I was glad of that.

I'm quite a big guy. Six-six and two hundred pounds. But I'm fit and a natural athlete. I eased over the six-foot fence and dropped to the ground. I jogged to the side of the house and made my way around to the rear.

The place was falling apart. If I pushed it, the walls would fall over. The back door was no problem with the picks. I slid an Infra-red viewer over my head and everything turned grey. I made my way slowly and silently through the ground floor. No dishes in the sink. I took the time to open the fridge. It had food in it. Everywhere looked deserted. Whoever lived here was probably not here right now.

I began to relax. I needed to be sure there was no one around before I began my detailed search. That might take hours, or even days if I had the time. Being secure was my first priority.

I made my way up the stairs. Slowly and silently again. I opened a few doors, nothing. I opened the last one on the end and it appeared a larger room. I was about to leave when I noticed something on the bed. A shape. It was someone sleeping. Two forms. Two people sleeping.

Tensing, I paused and waited. They didn't move. They hadn't heard me. What to do next. If this was The Magician and his wife, I'd cracked the case at first attempt. I felt excited. I felt...cheerful. But how to handle it? The man first, He was the most dangerous. I needed to disable him.

I slid the Taser from the back pack and switched it on. There was a faint whine, and I moved nearer the bed. Hit him with it first and be prepared to silence the woman. I could hit her, or if I had the time, use the Taser on her too.

Reaching the bed I pressed the stud.

A bright flash blinded me. I thought the Taser had exploded. I felt movement beside me and reacted accordingly. I leapt to one side and stumbled over some furniture. I felt my shoulder hit a wall which gave way. I found myself falling. I reacted naturally, quickly trying to relax and prepared for the jolt on hitting the ground.

I crashed to earth, and the wind was blown right out of me. I'd landed feet first, I do think I'm part cat. I rolled and took some of the impact out of the fall. My ankle had pain shooting up it, but I kept rolling and pulled off the Infra-red viewer.

Still blinded, I looked around for some idea where I was. In a blur ahead of me I saw the main gate. I ran stumbling towards it and heaved myself over. I heard a clang next to me followed by two others. Someone was shooting at me.

I'd landed awkwardly, my ankle giving way. From now on I could only hobble. There were no more shots, and I reached the Mustang and slid into the driver's seat. I pressed the starter and roared away, my ankle now throbbing like mad. I hoped I wouldn't have to use the brakes too much because it had no function left in it.

I hit the light switch, and the road lit up ahead of me. I was driving blindly and slowed down. I shook my head trying to clear my eyesight. If I was going to be pursued, it would take a while for the guy to get mobile. I made a few turns and finally found a decent road, then a larger one, then the A3. My eyes were getting clearer, so I floored the V8 and made good my escape.

Had I just met The Magician? If I had, I was lucky to get away. He was waiting for me, I'd been suckered into a trap. That wouldn't happen next time.

It would be my turn to fire the shots.

PART TWO – A DECISION CHANGED

CHAPTER EIGHT

LEVY

When I told Willoughby the news, he seemed delighted. So he should be.

It was my idea and the team's hard work. But I felt we'd finally had a breakthrough. For the last few days, I'd been considering my position in the Willoughby case. It was beginning to look very dire indeed. The mass of evidence against him was overwhelming, so I had to look for a flaw in the proceedings. Some misdemeanour by the prosecution, some loophole they'd missed, or just straightforward trickery on my part. I saw them now as the only ways to get the client freed.

A straightforward prosecution and defence case were not going to swing the jury, I was sure. We couldn't get enough evidence to challenge any of it. A mistrial was the best I now hoped for and concentrated all our efforts in making that happen.

But today it was a breakthrough. I still didn't think it was enough to swing the case. But it was a start to put a doubt in the minds of the prosecution that their case wasn't watertight.

I'm thorough in all my dealings with cases. I'm known for it. So when I asked for all CCTV evidence, it took a while to get it, view it and analyse it. But it boiled down to a few instances that I hoped would make a difference.

The Hotel Colonial had a very grainy piece of footage of the waiter who'd entered Willoughby's suite and stolen his briefcase. It caught the image as a reflection in a hall mirror, the camera being stationed at a crossroads in corridors. It showed an Italian looking man pushing the trolley and then knocking on the door. A few minutes later he came out pushing the same trolley, with the same contents on the top.

Clearly the thief.

The hard drive once in it was later handed in mysteriously by a good citizen. Bollocks! He was an Agent for assassins, but I would have to work hard to prove it. I needed to discredit this evidence as it was amongst the strongest the prosecution had. I would push for a reasoning that if there was a thief, there was intent to compromise Willoughby. Even, a faking of evidence. Discredit anything and everything.

One of the hotel staff had become suspicious after an alleged visit by a hotel inspector. When various footage of video was studied, no one recognised a man who appeared three times as a member of staff. Neither did any of the hotel organisations admit to sending someone over to inspect.

All very suspicious.

When still images were produced and cleaned up a little, the two men might be the same man, obviously disguised. The Magician's exact M.O. With a little manipulation in the digital photo unit I employ, we removed the obvious things like wig, contacts, moustache and we had a generic face.

The first really good look at the elusive Magician.

So with this and the two sketches, we were getting so close to someone recognising him. My only hope was that he was still in this country and not abroad.

Willoughby wanted to get the new image out as soon as possible so I arranged a press conference with TV cameras for the next day. I also updated the Bounty Hunter Pack, as I call it, and would email the image out to those who have registered an interest in the search.

I was surprised to have another visit from the rather odd, Mr Michigan. I know Willoughby has put an element of trust with this man, him being a Magician expert and all, but I'm still not sure he's fully on our side in all this. We shall see.

I sat him down and wasted my time offering refreshments. He looked the same as before, even the same odd suit and shirt too. Different tie though. He looked neat and clean, perhaps it was his business suit he only wore to meetings? I found the strange gold tooth disturbing, right in the front of his mouth!

I showed him the new image and sat back waiting for his comments. He seemed unimpressed. He handed it back and stared at me.

'The first ever real photograph of The Magician.' I said proudly.

'It could easily be a fake.'

I was shocked. Then angry. 'But this is the real Magician. This IS what he looks like.'

'He looks a bit like me. Not you, but a little like me. But your clerk outside, what's his name?'

'Richard.'

'It looks a little like him, too. Are you going to arrest Richard?'

'No of course not. He's my clerk.'

'Exactly. You know that, but the amateur sleuths out there won't know it. They might easily decide it was him and set about him and injure him. How would your conscience handle that? Or Richard's wife and family?'

‘They would have to have more reason to approach The Magician than just looks.’

‘Like what? He’s behaving in a sinister way? No, Mr Levy. I can advise you from many years’ experience, the general public see only one thing, money. If it looks like the picture, they’ll convince themselves it’s him. They’ll try it on. They’ll be dragging innocent men to police stations and demanding the reward. There must be millions of people who look like the man in this picture.’

‘We will see.’

‘You will indeed. One other thing you will see, and I’m sure you’ve thought of it.’

‘What?’ I didn’t feel quite so confident now.

‘How’re you, or the police, going to *prove* the man you eventually lock up is *the real* Magician?’

Michigan stood and waited, staring me down, having the height advantage and was looking down on me. I broke eye contact and looked away saying, ‘We all have our methods.’

‘In the meantime, you’ll have a mounting number of people in the hospital, or the morgue, who’ve tried to apprehend The Magician and have lost. As they all will.’

I felt myself glaring at him, ‘And exactly how would you catch this man, Mr Michigan? What’re you going to do that we can’t?’

‘Be absolutely *certain* I’ve identified The Magician and his location. Then get the *police* to arrest him. They are the true professionals, Mr Levy. Not Cruz, or Hawk, or Cosmo whatever. I’d suggest you advise Mr Willoughby to withdraw the bounty. Save your reputation and your conscience.’

‘I do what my client asks. Mr Willoughby firmly believes this is the only way, in the short term.’

Michigan sat down again, his power play ended. ‘You have a moral responsibility towards all those people, Levy, that you’ve sent on this hunt for the bounty. This man is a killer, any harm or deaths of those people will be laid at your door. You can be sure of that.’

‘That’s your opinion, Mr Michigan. Not mine.’

‘You’ve had no success so far have you?’ he was smiling.

‘It depends on how you measure the results.’ I said with a steady stare.

Michigan seemed exasperated. I can have that effect on people. I always stand my ground. When he spoke again it was with a resigned tone, which gave me encouragement that I was winning the argument.

'I've chased The Magician for ten years, Levy. I've not caught him, seen him, or could even guess what he looks like. Those images there....' He stabbed a finger to the pictures on my wall, '...will not be good enough to *legally* identify him. I've come to a disturbing fork in the road with my quest. And I'll share it with you, and you *alone*, Levy.'

I held my breath, this was intriguing.

'I'm beginning to think there is *no* Magician.' He must have seen my look of surprise. 'No Magician, but *several*. I believe we might be looking for several men. All look different from each other. Some,maybe.....not using disguises at all. All paid assassins.'

'You've no proof of that.' I was standing my ground again.

'No I don't. But neither do you have any proof that The Magician really exists at all. Do you?'

The stare was steady and intense. I knew I didn't have an answer to that. That's what all this bounty business was about. We needed a warm body to show the world the man exists, and he's responsible for some of the charges laid at Willoughby's door.

'Even if you found someone you could claim to be the wanted man.....' he paused for effect. It didn't affect me. '...how could you prove it? There has *never* been any DNA, or fingerprints to point to any *one* man doing any *one* crime that could carry a conviction in *any* court in Britain. None. None. *None*. Check that out when you have a moment.'

He had a point, but he didn't know how well I handled facts in the courtroom.

'In the extreme possibility, you trick your way through the jury and got a man charged with being "The Magician" and even sentenced....a few days later up could pop another one. Which is the real one? Let the first go and prosecute the second? Imprison him. Then a few days later, up pops another. And so on....Your case and reputation would be in tatters. Willoughby no longer believed in anything he says.'

'That's fantasy and you know it!' I showed anger and resentment now. The man was getting on my nerves. He accuses me of not being real in addressing the case, but his statements are nothing but wild fantasy.

'But no more than your current approach, Levy. When you fail to find The Magician, fail to provide evidence and put doubt on Willoughby's case. When you fail in any way, how do you think your client's going to react? I'll

tell you. Badly. Watch your back, Levy. He's a dangerous man. I suggest you take some of the more heinous charges against him seriously. The man *can* kill. You don't want the next to be you.'

'Preposterous. I think this meeting is over.' I was really angry now.

'If the Magician were active today, which I believe he isn't, Willoughby would be one of the first people to hire him. And when Willoughby's finished with you, one way or another, you need to watch your back.'

'Please leave.'

'Your life is in danger from Willoughby, as you're the person with knowledge of *all* Willoughby's personal secrets.'

'I'll call security.' I said with as much menace as possible. Even though we didn't have any security to speak of. He was raving now. Calm in words, but mad in content.

'Get Willoughby to drop the bounty, or you'll go down with him, Levy. It's always been my job to catch him, and now I'm not so sure we can catch him, even if he's still around.'

'I take orders from my client, not....you.'

'Good for you. Just one more thing. Arrange for me to meet with Willoughby.'

'He won't want to, I'm sure. I know I don't want you upsetting him with your fantasies.'

'He'll want to see me. Not all his precious recordings are held by the police. I know of someone who has recordings of him and YOU. Won't that look good on your C.V. when you lose this case, reputation and your job?'

A chill struck me. Recordings? Willoughby has more recordings? I'd heard all the ones the police had regarded as relevant to the case. I'd assumed that was all. Did Willoughby record our meetings? Was there anything damning on them? For him and ME?

'You're bluffing. Or lying.'

'Get me a meeting with Willoughby and let him decide. Do it soon before you have a new wave of problems because of that....' He pointed to the newest digital rendition of the wanted man. 'You're between a rock and a hard place, Levy. I can help you out of it or push you against it. Drop the bounty. It's best for everyone. Good day to you.'

He turned and left, and I sat down with a thump. My head whirling.

Could I believe him? No of course not. But what if Willoughby did have more recordings? I couldn't take that chance. It was quite likely that there *was* more audio evidence. Considering the number of recordings the police had found.

I needed to talk to Willoughby and see what he said. I needed to make enquiries about this Michigan fellow too. How come he knows so much we don't?

I sat at my desk for an hour trying to re-run everything that was said.

Why wasn't I sensible enough to make a recording of this visit?

CHAPTER NINE

JAGGER

I'd tried to prepare Lucie for what was coming, but it took the next sequence of events to make her realise exactly how bad it was going to be.

You can't prepare for someone breaking into your home. It had happened once to us with Kyle Wilber. Good 'ol Kyle, rest in peace. When it happened, a second time, we were more prepared than before.

As I'd tried to tell Lucie, if we lived solely in the safe room, I could set the rest of the house up as a trap. Using the dummies as before and all the new monitoring equipment, movement sensing gear. I could tell when anyone got into the house and where they were in it.

I'd stashed weapons and equipment in every room and knew exactly where everything was by touch alone. I had to rely on my ability to nullify any intruder, but it did leave a big question. What to do with them when I'd caught them?

Despite all my years as a paid assassin, I don't like killing people. I've only ever taken a life that won't be missed. If missed, in a positive way. So I don't want to kill people I don't know, whatever their motive is in breaking into my house. So death by the enraged homeowner was out.

But I've made a lot of mistakes recently letting people live. They've come back to haunt me. But these people hunting me don't know me. They're only after the money. Take away the thought of money and they would leave me alone. I had to hope that was enough.

I had decided. Disable and send them on their way, then.

I saw the terror on Lucie's face at the alarm and I smiled. With a cheery, 'Here we go again, sweetie.' I quickly finished my coffee and kissed the top of her head. 'Back in a minute. You know the knock.'

Slipping out the door I heard it clunk behind me. It was self-locking, and I knew Lucie wouldn't do anything stupid like come out after me. She now had the monitors to watch the progress.

I didn't know yet whether that was a good or a bad thing. She said she wanted to know everything, so she could understand what was really going on. Here was her chance, let's see if that's what she really wants?

I made my way up to the main bedroom as I thought that was our best choke point. It had the visual attraction of two people in bed. It would look like the end of the search for whoever broke in. I waited in the now familiar

place, beside the wardrobe. Next to me, I had a few items of what I hoped would be useful tools. And a gun as a last resort only.

I let myself relax in the silence of the house. There was a slight creak here and there, but it was an old house. I saw the door move and let my breath out, then in slowly. My eyes had adjusted, and I saw the figure enter the room.

It looked like a man, quite large, much bigger than me. He'd something on his head covering his eyes. An Infra-red viewer, I guessed. He could see in the dark better than I could. He would see me if I moved. I gripped my torch and placed my thumb over the switch.

As he approached the bed I waited until his concentration was on the dummies, then I moved. As I took three quick steps forward I heard the whine of something, later to realise was a Taser.

I pressed the button on the torch and aimed the beam at his eyes. The intensified light by the Infra-red made the light of the torch a blinding one. He reacted quickly, covering his eyes and turning away.

As he did so, he stumbled against a chair by the bed. Again his quick reactions pushed him away from it and he crashed against the bedroom window. He was a big man, a heavy man, and he went straight through the window. The mullioned pieces almost forming a cartoon shape around him as he disappeared over the window ledge.

I ran back to the wardrobe and grabbed the Glock. I hurried back to the window to see him struggling to get up off the ground. I expected to see him unconscious, broken bones, or even dead.

He was dashing for the gate! More hobbling I suppose, but this guy was one hell of an athlete. Hawk, Nomos, or Cruz? I wondered which one. Or none of the above?

He was folding himself over the main gate and I took quick aim. I didn't want to kill him, so I aimed for legs and arms. He was flapping about so quickly, I think I missed everything. That was unlike me. Now I was mad, I should've shot to kill. I just knew I'd regret it.

I watched him disappear into the dark and sighed in frustration. I considered a chase, but I didn't know who else was out there. In the dark, with weapons. Not worth the risk. Hopefully, he's learned a lesson tonight and wouldn't try again. I doubted it, the way my luck was running. I heard a car start up in the distance. It sounded big and powerful, deep-throated.

I now had a window to fix and glass to clear up from the outside gravel. But first, comfort Lucie.

We sat over a hot chocolate and her favourite biscuits, Bourbons.

‘It’s an old house, not a fortress. Anyone determined can get in. How long can we defend it for? Who knows? Some bright spark will consider burning the house down one night, trying to drive us out.’ I instantly regretted the images those words could form in her mind.

I saw a shudder run through her.

‘You’re going to give me, ‘I think we should leave here’ speech again. Aren’t you?’ She said, not with too much fear in her eyes.

‘I really don’t think we can stay here any longer. Soon there’ll be cars parked in our lane. People queuing up to meet us.’ I smiled at the weak attempt at levity. She tried to smile but failed badly.

I held her hands around the hot cup and said, ‘However, I’ve been looking at this information Levy has given the Hunters. It seems to me, no one has mentioned my last warehouse.’

I looked at her to judge the interest. She looked up, always expecting to hear bad news now.

‘When I think about it, Naomi tracked me there on her own. What if she didn’t tell anyone about it? Nobody knows. I’ll have to check it out carefully, install new security, but it’s going to be safer that this place. Anything is going to be. We’ll be less comfortable there, though it’s a little more exposed.’

‘Still not a fortress.’ She said quietly.

‘Nothing is. Except a fortress and I don’t have one of those. I really think you should go to visit the Kobays in Hungary. They can protect you better than I can.’

‘I’m not going on my own. I’m not going. I don’t have a passport, I don’t like travel and I hate foreigners. Well, not hate. I don’t know any.’ She was working herself up into a righteous anger.

‘Okay. Just a suggestion. We’ll just....have to keep doing what we can. But I think we have to move out of here as soon as possible.’ She had no answer to that. Neither of us did.

‘Luce, there’s now only two ways left to end this. Kill Willoughby or get him to remove the bounty.’

‘I know.....’ she said quietly.

The alarm sounded. Loud in the break in the conversation.

‘Again?’ she said nervously.

I looked at my mobile on the table, it was that making the noise.

'Your new friend is paying us a visit.' I said.

'Oh...that's been making that noise for a while. While you were...you know.'

'What!' I said looking quickly up at the screen. I expected the mobile alarm to alert me when her car was near. It had been for a while now. Then, another alarm went off.

I pointed unnecessarily to a shadowy figure climbing over the main gate.

'Rita?' Lucie said peering at the screen closely.

'No, Toni. You know, the Bounty Hunter. Christ! Will this nightmare ever end? What the hell am I going to do with her? How did she find us?'

'Do not harm her!' Lucie's eyes were wide, almost fear, almost anger. I wanted them to be neither.

'Of course not. Besides, she doesn't carry a gun.'

'How do you know?' she looked at me, at least the fear and anger had lessened.

'She didn't have one on her when Iwas introduced.'

'Don't harm her in any way, Jag. I mean it!'

'So do I. But we must put a stop to each of these invaders as best we can. But I will harm no Bounty Hunters in the making of this film. I promise. Better go.'

'I'll come with you.'

'No!' I couldn't have made it more emphatic. She took a step back. 'Just in case she's brought a gun THIS time. Stay. Please. Do not make this more difficult than it has to be. Now promise?'

I glared at her. She dropped her eyes and nodded. 'Say it.'

'Okay. I won't go with you if you won't harm her. She saved me from Rico don't forget that. Something I thought you'd done.'

'We'll finish this later.'

It miffed me at having Rico thrown back in my face. Again! There was a typical example, had I just killed him, we wouldn't be doing this right now. Rico had led Moss straight here. Had I killed him all those years ago and Lucie knew about it, would she be happy – No. Now if I killed him? – Christ, if I know. I had work to do.

I decided on the master bedroom again. God, this was getting boring! But what the hell was I going to do with Moss? I had to play it by ear. She uses a Taser, I needed to stay out of the way of that. So disarm and disable. I made it sound easy.

I don't like the thought of wrestling with a woman. That sounded strange, not coming out right. But I know what I mean. Any form of violence towards women is unnatural to me. Hence me wanting to frighten Rico off. What man could strike a woman? I hoped I wouldn't answer that question in the next few minutes!

It seemed an awfully long time before I saw the door move. Still, she hesitated. Cautious. Okay, I know all about that. She entered the room. I could see she had the Taser pointed forward. I knew exactly when she saw the dummies, thinking they were real, and her stealthy approach towards them.

She got very near and hesitated. I was waiting for her to come around the side of the bed nearest me. I wanted two quick steps and another nerve hold if possible, it'd worked before.

I saw her hands moving, and she tucked the Taser under her arm. She was fiddling with something and I heard a slight click. Then another.

She was taking photos!

Moss moved nearer and slowly reached out her hand to the duvet. She was about to discover the ruse. I tensed, ready.

She reached out and gently pulled the duvet away from the dummy. She stiffened and then put both hands in the air. Her Taser fell with a clatter on the floor. She slowly turned and looked around the room.

'I mean you no harm.' She said. Her accent was slightly Northern. Couldn't quite place it. I stood still, waiting for her to make the next move. She obviously suspected she'd been duped and the person doing it was waiting in hiding for her. Not wanted to be shot, she took the other option. Surrender.

I'd taken the precaution earlier of putting some disguise on. Not enough for most purposes, but if I kept everything in the dark, it would do. I wasn't expecting this.

'Take off your jacket.' I said quietly and easily.

She did so, slowly and carefully, resting it on the bed. That's where she kept all her Bounty Hunting equipment and any weapons. She was wearing some sort of woollen jumper and trousers. No holster, or anywhere she could hide a weapon.

‘Take out your plastic cuffs and cuff yourself. Hands in front of you.’

Once again she did exactly as asked and slowly, so I could see there were no deceptions. When she finished, she raised her hands above her head to show it was complete.

‘Sit in the chair and close your eyes.’

This she hesitated with. I could understand why. When she’d done that I came out of the shadows and moved quickly towards her. She stiffened and waited for her fate. I was behind her and trying to find something to blindfold her with. I took off my T-shirt and rolled it. Putting it gently across her eyes, I tied a large knot behind her head.

‘I’m not going to hurt you. I just need you to answer some questions.’

‘All right.’

Her voice was level and unafraid.

I turned on the bedside lamp and looked up towards the tiny camera in the corner of the ceiling. I waved at it, beckoning for Lucie to join me. This was not something I wanted to handle on my own.

I remained silent, preferring to wait for Lucie.

‘Who are you?’ she said quietly and without fear.

‘Who do you think I am?’ I kept my accent neutral as I do on all occasions that are not defined as a specific threat, or otherwise.

‘I’m hoping you are The Magician. I want to meet you. I’ve met your wife. Nice lady.’

‘They have given you the wrong information, ma’am.’ I said and remained silent. She didn’t.

‘How is Lucie? All right, I hope. May I have a word with her?’

‘Who’s Lucie?’

‘I should imagine the woman who shares this house with you. I know she’s here somewhere. I’m no threat. In fact, I’m a friend. Ask her. I’ll wait.’

How long before Lucie could get here? I moved to the bedroom door and stood just outside. Keeping an eye on Moss but looking downstairs to see Lucie coming. After a few minutes, Lucie came running up the stairs.

I whispered, ‘She wants to talk to you. She seems...safe. I think.’

Lucie patted my hand and said, ‘Told you so.’

Lucie took a deep breath and entered the room. She knew what to expect as she'd been watching the monitors in the safe room. So the sight of her "new friend" handcuffed, seated and blindfolded was not a surprise. More....a disappointment. It could be relief...that I didn't kill her. Perhaps a combination of all those emotions.

Lucie squatted in front of Moss and touched her hands.

'Lucie?' Moss said without fear or surprise. 'I knew it would be you.'

'How did you know how to find me, Rita?'

'Ahh, Rita. Call me Toni, my real name. Sorry about the ...misunderstanding. I'm sure your....husband has made the situation clear. I...planted a tracker in your overnight bag. Sorry. I just had to find The Magician.'

Lucie looked at me and I shook my head.

'There is no Magician, Toni. At least, not here. I think you have your wires crossed somewhere. We're just an ordinary married couple that someone thinks is somebody else. It's become a nightmare for us.'

Lucie looked at me for reassurance and I nodded. She pointed to the blindfold, and I shook my head. I waved my hand across my face to indicate not enough disguise. She nodded.

'You're the second person that's broken into our house tonight. Third this week.'

'So others have got their wires crossed too, then?'

'I think there's been some error in communication somewhere. Sorry, you've wasted your time....Toni.'

'No, it's not wasted. I met you and I think I've met your husband.' She raised her voice for me to hear, '...my shoulder's still very sore. Where did you learn that trick, Magician School?'

I let the silence hang. I liked this woman, she was smart and secure in herself. If she was facing the real Magician, and she still thought that, she was unafraid. That made her brave, or stupid. I opted for brave.

But what to do with her? Lucie was looking at me for guidance. I shrugged.

'Can we make a deal here?' Moss said quietly. She fidgeted a little in her chair. 'Can we at least get these cuffs off? I never realised how uncomfortable and painful the fuckers can be. Please?'

I nodded to Lucie and threw her my clasp knife. She caught it deftly and cut away the plastic cuffs. It took several attempts; those things are tough. Moss rubbed her wrists and seemed to relax a little more.

'I can assume you're not going to kill me now.' Moss said.

Lucie thought a moment before saying, 'If the Magician were here he might.' She left the end unfinished. Subtle. She was getting good at this.

'If you say so, Lucie. May I ask some questions?'

Lucie looked at me and I nodded. 'Okay. What do you want to know?' Lucie said.

'Are you going to let me go?'

A few moments thought from Lucie before she said, 'That depends on whether you can keep a promise.'

'What promise?'

'If you're willing to promise to leave us alone, accept the fact you've got our identities wrong....then we will let you go.'

Moss was thinking. She scratched her forehead, and I shrunk back into the shadows of the hallway, thinking she was going to take off the blindfold to get a look at the man she still thought was the Magician.

'I can't do that. Not in my nature. I'm so close to my quarry....I can't give up now. If you can't let me go, you'll have to kill me. As you're not the Magician....we have a stalemate. Any chance of a cup of tea?'

I could see Lucie stifle a laugh and I felt my mind changing towards this woman. She was not going to be put off, but perhaps....if we could change her perspective of her mission. Ideas were forming in my mind. Time to turn defence, into offence.

I nodded to Lucie and moved my head indicating the hallway. Lucie stood and said, 'I'll see what I can do.'

Lucie walked out of the room past me and she gave me a peck on the cheek and a grin. I patted her bottom as she passed, and I walked into the room. In my wardrobe, I have spare fat suits, hairpieces and makeup. I quietly, but quickly, began to put together a disguise while Moss waited and listened to my every movement.

'Why're you after this Magician guy?' I said shedding my jeans.

'Money. What else?'

'Just money?'

‘Job satisfaction, I suppose.’ She was fidgeting again.

‘Leave the blindfold on for a while. You make me nervous.’

‘Really? I can hear you changing clothes. Did I catch you at an inopportune moment?’

I tried to be quieter. Nothing got past this woman.

‘I don’t want to appear indecent in front of a stranger. My wife wouldn’t appreciate it either. Just putting on some clothes.’

‘Don’t dress for me. I’m the uninvited guest. I can only apologise for that. But how else can I do my job?’

‘You keep saying this is your job. What exactly is your job?’

The fat suit was on and I pulled a baggy pair of tracksuit bottoms and an over-sized cotton shirt over my head.

‘I find people and return them to where they came from. Or used to. I worked for the UK Border Agency. With the Migrant Refusal Pool. Heard of it?’

‘No. can’t say I have.’

Hairpiece on and glasses. Quick cheek pads. Less noise now. Nearly there.

‘Workers and students who’re living here illegally. I find them and hand them over to the authorities.’

‘Like...a Bounty Hunter?’

‘A term technically not used in the UK, but it’ll do.’

A quick application of slap as I walked around to distract from the number of changes I’m making to myself.

‘I suppose you heard about the huge reward for this....Magician, and couldn’t resist?’ I said casually.

‘Something like that. I find people, it’s what I’m good at. What a challenge. The bigger the amount of money of the prize, the bigger the challenge. No one offers a fortune for something that’s going to be easy. Let’s face it, I found The Magician very quickly.’

‘If only you had. That would get everyone else off our backs.’

‘Talk all you like, Mr Lucie. I have my facts correct. We both know it.’

‘We’re going to have to agree to differ. But I’d like you to see this from my perspective.’

‘Okay. I’ve an open mind.’

‘Good to hear it. Just imagine, if you can with your open mind, just imagine, for *one* moment, that I’m NOT the Magician.’

‘Okay. We’re on the road to fantasy land. But okay.’

‘Now put yourself in my position. People hunting me down because of one reason.’

‘The prize money.’

‘Yes....but more....no one knows what the Magician looks like. If they did, he’d be located by now. So....if no one knows what he looks like....what real value is he if captured? Who’s going to identify him? Who’s going to point a finger and say, “that man there, is The Magician”?’

‘A good supposition, Mr Lucie.’

‘Okay, how about we assume, and this is just an assumption we assume I AM the Magician?’

‘Now we’re approaching the realms of credibility.’

‘Who’s going to point a finger at ME and say, “He IS the Magician”?’

‘Me.’

‘And what proof would you present to the court?’

‘All the details I have on The Magician lead right to you.’

‘And who gave you those details?’

‘A well-respected lawyer.’

‘Well respected and representing, Jamison Willoughby?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So if all the relevant evidence to the Magician’s identity has come from one source, Willoughby’s lawyer, who is defending Willoughby on multiple charges.....how can the defendant prove his own case? When all the information comes from him and only him? The courts are going to believe he’s made it all up. There is NO evidence against the Magician – ever. They have found none. Never will be found because of one overriding fact.’

‘Which is?’ her voice was not so confident now.

‘There is *no* Magician.’

‘Next, you’ll be telling me there is no Santa Clause.’

‘No one has his DNA or fingerprints. No evidence, no Magician. I rest my case.’

I could hear the rattling of teacups coming up the stairs. I was ready now and sat on the bed, looking as casual as I could, as Lucie came in. She put the tray on a table and I motioned for her to take off Moss’s blindfold.

Moss blinked a while and looked straight at me. ‘You look something like the sketches. And the photo.’

‘So do a million others, and possibly why our continually mistaken identity.’

‘They know This address as the home of The Magician.’

‘Many seem to think so. None have proved it so. Neither have you.’

‘I beg to differ.’

‘If you were to take me in now, let’s assume in “reality land” I let you, what do you think would happen?’

‘I’d be delighted I was so successful.’

‘And collect the reward for The Magician?’

‘Yes. Of course.’

‘How would the money be awarded? What basis? What was the stipulation?’

‘The Magician brought to trial.’

‘That’s right, I remember the TV broadcast. The Magician brought to trial. Proven guilty another pay-out and finally, Willoughby freed. Am I right?’ She nodded. ‘And for the first part, The Magician brought to trial, how would that happen? To try a person, you first have to prove you have the right person. How would the courts do that?’

Now she was unsure.

‘Tea?’ Lucie said aware the tension was building.

I stood up and said, ‘Excuse me a moment. Lucie, love, entertain our guest. I’ll be right back. Don’t let her steal the silverware.’

My mind was racing, and I had an idea that may turn around a few things. I hurried to the safe room and opened the hidden safe there. Inside I had a series of small voice recorders all colour coded. I picked up the blue

one and tested to make sure there was enough battery power still in it. I hurried back upstairs.

Lucie and Moss were now seated in comfortable chairs and were finishing up a plate of biscuits. How quickly women bond, even when one is trying to put the other's husband in prison.

I stood in front of Moss and said, 'I have here something I want you to hear. As you may know, strong evidence exists against Willoughby in the form of voice recordings he's made over the years. Not all those recordings are in the hands of the police. I was given these the other day, by someone who understands the problems I'm having, and they said to use them as I see fit.'

I could see her curiosity rising as I spoke. She reached over and placed her teacup and saucer on the tray and leant forward. Her eyes never leaving mine. I pressed the play button and the voices of Willoughby and Levy were the only sound in the room for the next few minutes.

When the recording ended Moss was silent. Her eyes were staring at the floor, processing what she'd heard against what she thought she knew. I left it a while before I spoke.

'That was Willoughby and Levy plotting their defence in the upcoming trials. As you can tell, Levy is not a man that believes in "The truth and nothing but the truth". Far from it in fact. Judging by his chosen tactics he plans to wreck the case rather than win it. Of course, the evidence against Willoughby is overwhelming.'

She looked up at me. 'And the point you're making?'

'Levy can't last as his lawyer. Willoughby will never get off free. The Magician is only a distraction. It has no meaning other than to deflect attention. The Magician will *never* be found, that's not Willoughby's intention. The bounty will *never* be paid. He could've offered a hundred million pounds and the results would be the same.'

She was thinking it all through. 'Are those recordings genuine?'

'I believe they are. The others in the police hands have been proved so, voice matching and the like. No reason to think these are fake. Although the sketches and photo identities may be.'

'I see.'

'I hope you do. Willoughby and Levy have offered a reward for somebody who *supposedly* is the real villain and not Willoughby. But when these recordings are released, they'll show Levy and Willoughby are going about their defence in an illegal and immoral manner. How can any of their statements be trusted? How much credibility can be attached to a *mythical*

man like The Magician? You might as well try to find Robin Hood or Batman. More tea?’

Lucie moved nearer to Moss and put her arms around her new friend. ‘He’s right. Every word.’

If there was a tear in Moss’s eyes it was quickly suppressed. ‘What if I don’t believe you?’

‘Nothing.’

‘What do you mean “nothing”?’

I said, ‘Nothing. You can walk away. Why should I stop you? I can only charge you with breaking and entering. No theft, or any real damage. If I did that, I’d be down the police station every day for the next few weeks.’

‘Okay. I suppose I should say thank you.’

I’m *not* The Magician. Lucie is *not* married to the Magician. It’s just that everyone thinks so because Willoughby had *said* so. Levy has publicly announced it. *Neither* of them knows who The Magician is. Lucie left me because she was frightened for me. People like you are after her to get to a mythical man that no one really knows exist. But there is a way you can redeem yourself to us if - you’re willing?’

I saw a new look in her eyes. It was a very rapid overcoming of disappointment and doubt. ‘What?’

‘If you want to make a bit of a name for yourself, you can give these recordings to the police. It’ll help get rid of Levy and it’s one less obstacle to us getting the bounty dropped. That’s my *only* goal now, getting the bounty withdrawn. If we can get rid of Levy, whoever replaces him may be inclined to cancel the bounty. I’m convinced once Willoughby is proven guilty, everything can go back to normal. We’ll no longer be hunted targets.’

She was thinking.

I added, ‘We need to get the message to all those concerned that it’s over. It’ll greatly help Lucie and me.’

‘Why don’t *you* hand those in?’ She waved at the small player.

I’m involved far too much now. At least the police are not actively looking for *me*. There may be a problem when Levy is questioned by the police that they may want his files. In those files will be all the information you have about The Magician. This house will crop up. It’s a big risk I’m taking. If I took them in myself I’d draw police interest, as well as all the nutters out there to get us. No offence by nutters. I didn’t mean.....’

‘None taken. But if I hand this in, aren’t they going to ask me where I got it from?’

‘Anonymous tip-off. Tell them you were on the trail of a man you thought might be The Magician. Ask if the bounty is still viable and, indeed, legal. It might not be. Defence Counsellors get a lot of leeway under their pretence of investigation for their case.’

‘Will you do that for us, Toni?’ Lucie said quietly.

‘I need time to think about this.’

‘The longer you wait, the more visitors we’re going to get. One of them might not be just armed with a Taser, like you.’ Lucie finished, patting Moss’s hand.

Moss looked straight at me and said, ‘And you’re definitely not The Magician?’

I smiled. ‘I don’t know who The Magician is. But it’s definitely not me.’

It was now a matter of how much she’d believe me.

As far as I was concerned, The Magician really was dead.

CHAPTER TEN

LUCIE

I awoke to bad dreams. Vague in the recalling.

You know the typethat leave you disturbed, but don't know why? They've been increasing these last few days. But it's no real wonder why. Our lives have been turned upside down. Despite Jagger's confidence, "It will all end when Willoughby gets sentenced", I don't know if my nerves will last that long.

Last night two Bounty Hunters broke into our house. TWO! For most people in the world, it wouldn't happen to them once in a million lifetimes.

TWO!

I'd accepted RITA as a friend. Now I had to make a separate judgement on Toni. She was likeable and seemed totally non-threatening. What was she going to do by breaking in? Just take photos? Get the police to raid us? On what grounds?

Jagger was right, the more you think about capturing The Magician, the stupider it gets. There was no point. Nothing to be gained and a lot of time wasted. But somebody was going to get hurt. I just hope it wasn't either of us.

By the time Toni walked away down our driveway, I think she'd given up the idea of getting Jagger arrested as The Magician. At least, she sounded like she had. If she *does* come back with the police, she's no longer my friend.

Friend!

The thought struck me like a hammer.

Sharen!

'Jag? We need to get, Sharen.'

'No, we don't. We can't leave here just like that. Besides, where's she going to go? You can't have her here. It's too.....problematical. She can't live with us in the safe room, can she?'

He was right but wrong. I still had to help her even if she couldn't live here. 'We must help her. How can we do that?'

'She has my house and some money. We get a message to her and tell her to stay there and get....better. You need to call her. Get her number from someone.'

‘Who the fuck do I know that has her number?’

‘Okay. Take it easy. We’ll go out in the van and go and see her. Okay?’

I felt a sense of relief at his agreement. I know these are difficult times for us, but they’re worse for her. She’s alone and in a strange place. I just hope she can stay off the drugs. She could if she was here, and we were watching her.

‘Aren’t there organisations that take these people in and help them?’ Jagger said softly.

‘Yes of course. We could try that. It might take money.’

‘We have that.’

‘I wouldn’t want her to think we’re abandoning her, though. What do you think?’

‘Look into it. Get something organised and we’ll go and get her.’

I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him. It reminded me that we don’t seem to have the time to show affection these days. We’re both rather too uptight for it. I hugged him for a long time until I could feel him getting restless. They say there’s a definitive duration for a hug. A few seconds if you’re just friends. Longer if you’re lovers. I’d clearly over-reached even the lover bit. I let go.

It took a lot of research and many phone calls, but finally, I found a small charity in Dagenham that would accept another patient. I said I’d bring her along that afternoon and they agreed to do an initial assessment. I mentioned there would be a generous donation if required. ‘We always need donations, madam.’ She said.

It occurred to me with a sudden flash of disappointment, that if Rita from Soiled Doves was for real, she’d be the ideal person to handle Sharen for us. But Rita wasn’t real, and Sharen was.

I was pestering Jagger for two hours to get going and pick up Sharen. He seemed to be too busy to listen and was working away in his small workshop at the rear of the house. I fought my way through my limited range of emotions, anxiousness, frustration and finally bordering on angry. I don’t get angry with him very often....oh yeah, I do.

Finally, he was ready. He was in full disguise and then had a surprise for me. He held out a long mid-brown wig and heavy spectacles. ‘I’m not wearing those!’ Was my quick response.

‘You are, if we’re going to run the gauntlet into London.’

Again – I knew he was right. So grumpily I pulled on the wig and glasses. He burst out laughing.

‘That’s it. I’m not fucking wearing this. Ever!’

Jagger had kept a few of his vehicles on the farm. One was an old white panel van, no windows other than the front seats. This time it had the name of ‘Whitton & Sons. Roofing and Gutter Restoration’. I like the use of the word “restoration”. Another word for making things better.

We drove out of the drive slowly, the gates opening electronically and closing behind us. The lane looked empty. But we didn’t know who was out there watching. I could see Jagger’s eyes never stop moving, studying every tree and its leaves. We reached the end of the bumpy lane and turned right. Still all clear.

We picked up speed. Jagger his eyes on every junction up ahead and the rear-view mirrors to check behind. I don’t know which route we took to Battersea, but it must’ve been planned by a blind man. At least we were sure we hadn’t been followed.

It was uncomfortable as Jagger made me sit in the back of the van. I had a makeshift seat which was what he’d been making while keeping me waiting. He thought it best we weren’t seen together. He had a point. I suppose.

We parked in one of the last available spaces in the small Battersea road that we’d called home for a few weeks. I was glad to leave it and sad to be back. Jagger told me to wait while he checked everything was okay. Over-cautious again!

I watched through the passenger side window as Jagger walked up to the house. He looked through the front window which had curtains pulled. He looked back at me without any expression and moved to the front door. I saw his hand move to his belt and had a sudden fear that guns would be a feature here.

He opened the door and went in. It closed behind him and I waited for the shots. They never came. I sat back in my uncomfortable chair and waited.

After a short time, the back door of the van was suddenly jerked open.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CRUZ

It had all happened in a matter of seconds.

Yet they were the most humiliating few seconds of my life. I'd been soundly beaten, tricked and conned all in one. That just doesn't happen to me!

I felt the anger build as I hurried back home. My eyesight took a long while to clear. Damn Infra-red goggles. I drove like a madman for a while until I got myself back in control again. I didn't want to be pulled over by the police, not with all the gear I carry in the car. I'd have trouble explaining all that lot. Especially the weapons.

I needed to get home, regroup and start again. The bastard had only made me more determined than ever to get him. His reputation appeared well deserved.

But so did mine.

I had to think and think clearly. This was no ordinary bounty. Whoever set the reward level for this knew what they were doing. There're not many people in this country that were going to tie this guy down. But I was one of them. And I was going to be the only one.

Think!

A frontal attack did not work.

Fact.

Was it one man, or several in that room? Unknown. Probably one. I felt the presence of one person, but another could have been there. One target, maybe two.

Location. Would they remain there? Possibly. They feel they could defend it. And they did too. Return for a second try, but more prepared this time.

Timing. As soon as possible.

I had something to eat and drink and tried to get some sleep. I needed an early start; I wanted to be back at that farm before daylight. But this time I was going to be ready.

Parking the GTO several roads away, I carried a heavy bag of equipment up through the dense woods. It took me an hour in the dark and another half hour as dawn broke. I got myself positioned so I could see the front of the house and the road leading up to the driveway. It was the best I could do,

without actually getting onto the property. I was sure that he'd all that monitored and alarmed. How else did he know I was there? I'm as silent as a ghost.

I set up a tripod and clipped on my sniper rifle, a Sako TRG-22. Takes .300mm ammo and has a weight of just over 5 kg. I've used it for years and love it. I knew I wasn't going to kill him. But I might need a small piece of lead to slow him down enough for me to capture him. And I *was* going to capture this fucker.

On my hip, I carried a suppressed Steyr M-1A with a laser pointer. The first two rounds are special loads I made myself. I also had a knife and handcuffs. And that was about the order I saw my game plan. Long range wounding shot, short-range wounding shot, very short-range stab and finally arrest, handcuffed and capture in one piece.

I had food and water for a few days and a comfortable mat to rest on. I'd a motion sensor set up on a small tripod, facing the gate. If I fell asleep, I'd be warned of any movement, day or night.

It was fully light by the time I'd everything set up and settled down for a very long wait.

It was about four hours later that my sensor pinged in my ear. I was awake, and I'd noticed some slight movement just at the edge of its range. I saw a white panel truck pull out from an outbuilding to the east of the main farmhouse. The false commercial signs on the side didn't fool me for a second. It paused while the garage doors electronically closed. I had the Infra-red scope to my eyes and saw into the truck. A driver and one other in the back. The one in the back could be a woman.

The main gate was swinging open, and I had a decision to make. What if this wasn't my target? I'd show my hand. What if those two were decoys so I WOULD show my hand? I couldn't just shoot at them.

Quick. Plan B.

I pulled out the Steyr and chambered a round. It was a light load, no distance or force, but it was merely a vehicle for the payload at the front. A small, but broad-ranged tracker. I held the sights on the van as it came towards me.

I watched as it turned left out onto the lane and hit the first of many potholes. That's when I fired. I saw the slug hit the van in the rear bumper and was sure the suspension being hammered by the road would cover the sound of the strike. The tracker remained attached. I might risk another, but it might just sound loud enough to alert the driver and passenger.

Now another decision. If these were decoys, they would drive awhile and return. I gave them.....five minutes. Meanwhile, I carefully watched the house. Any windows with even the slightest movement, someone looking to see if a hunter in wait had been drawn out. I was far too clever for them to allow that to happen.

Five minutes. Time to go.

Time was of the essence now. I left all my equipment set up, I might need it again later. I ran to my car and snapped my monitor onto its cradle on the dashboard and clicked through the menus. A beep, not too far away. It was an old van and wouldn't be going fast. Time to follow.

The next two hours were a draining pain in the ass. I think we must have travelled along every street in London. That would've been bad enough if I was just following the bastard. But I didn't want him to spot me. My car is distinctive, as am I, so I was trying to drive along parallel roads to him. Out of sight, but still with him as a blip on my monitor.

When he finally stopped, I was in the street next to him. I edged forward until I had a visual on the van and waited. A man got out. Slightly older and fatter than I'd expected, but then if this WAS the Magician, I should expect a disguise. He wouldn't fool me. He walked toward a house. I edged the car forward and found somewhere illegal to park about fifty metres from the van.

As I saw him enter the house and shut the door, I got out of my car and slung a small backpack over my shoulder. I hurried towards the van, watching the front door all the way. As I neared the vehicle I had the Taser ready and approached from the rear, hoping it was the blind side. Someone was inside, and I thought it to be a woman. The Magician's wife.

I put my hand on the rear door handle and took a deep breath. I pulled hard, and it opened. If it was locked, I'd have to hope the other doors were not locked too.

There was a woman inside who looked up as I entered. Her look of welcome soon turned to fear. She was dark and very attractive. Nice figure from what I could see, where she was sitting on an old car seat welded to the side of the van.

I pointed the Taser at her and held my finger to my lips to silence her. Her fear stopped any sound coming out. I waited a few seconds until she knew who was in control. I pulled out my hunting knife and slid into the van. Her eyes were wide with fear now. That's just what I wanted.

I slipped a ball gag into her mouth and Velcroed it behind her head. I whispered, 'Not a sound, or he gets shot. Understood?' I nodded my head towards the house where her husband had gone into. She nodded quickly.

‘Come with me and hurry.’ She moved instantly, I liked this hostage.

I closed the van doors and pushed her towards my car. I eased her into the passenger seat and fastened a pair of plastic cuffs to her wrists. Her eyes were staring at me in pure fright.

‘Don’t worry, Love. You’ll see him again real soon.’

I pulled out a small tin box I carry and pulled off the lid. Inside was a piece of lint soaked in chloroform. I held it over her nose and after a brief struggle she fell asleep. I removed the gag, as it wouldn’t look good her wearing it, while I was driving along crowded London streets.

I rested her head gently against the side glass and fired up the engine. A quick look in the mirror showed the man hadn’t surfaced from the house yet and I pulled out and accelerated away.

Back to Hayling Island where I’d be totally undisturbed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JAGGER

It took me a several minutes to realise Lucie had gone.

If she had left the van voluntarily, it would only have been to help me with Sharen. My heart almost stopped. I thought of a dozen things it might be, but one overwhelming reason came to me. She'd been taken by one of the Bounty Hunters. It had to be that.

I'd a lot to think about and more things to do.

I should have taken her with me. No time for reprisals, I'd beat myself up later.

Sharen was awake and feeling well when I went in. She was still disorientated and wanted to know who I was. I mentioned Lucie, and she seemed to respond. I told her we're going to look after her for a while and she seemed glad about that.

Now she was sitting in the passenger seat of a ten-year-old van needing help, and I had my wife to worry about.

I couldn't do anything with Sharen in tow, but neither should I spend time sorting her out either. I had to do both at the same time. I made a decision and started up the van.

Dagenham first.

I drove as fast as possible, given the van's limited abilities. London traffic does not get better, especially when you're in a hurry. I made the first of my calls on the road. Careful to watch for police monitors and cars. I slipped on a headset that allowed me to be hands-free. I had a performance to make.

'Levy. Michigan. How are you?' I took the silence at the other end to mean it was not going to be easy. 'I think we got off on the wrong foot last time andI'd like to make it up to you.' Carrot first, then stick.

'Who is this?'

'You know very well who it is. I just said so. Ta Ya Michigan. We spoke about some material that might be of interest to you. If you remember?' I let the silence stretch for as long as he needed.

'Material?'

'Sure. Recordings. I know everyone hates the sound of their own voice, but these are very....emotive and sentimental. Surely you remember.'

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Just the opposite. I was reconsidering who they should be given to. As I said, I know a...friend. who has them and I can get hold of them.’

‘How much?’ He was not stupid, and he was used to money changing hands.

‘Just a favour, or two.’ Another long silence.

‘Go on.’

‘The Bounty Hunters who knocked at your door.....’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have any CCTV records of their visits?’

A pause, ‘Why?’

‘Because I’ve an ...interest ...in one of them. In particular the cars they drive. It’d be a big incentive for me if I could see any recordings of the cars and who drove them.’ Another longer pause.

‘You mentioned a second favour?’

‘Only a repeat of the request I made to see Willoughby. If *you* had the recordings, it would be an entirely different discussion I’d be having with him.’ Another silence. ‘Both requests benefit you, Levy.’

‘How can I contact you?’

I gave him the number of the burner phone I had on the dashboard and said, ‘This is very much hurry up, Levy. Pretend I’m your client on death row. Pretend that those videos are the only thing that can save me. Do that, and I’ll pretend I’ve never heard any voice recordings.’

‘I get the originals? No copies made?’

‘I agree.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Don’t take too long. Sometime today the police are going to get a present.’ I rang off and hoped it was enough.

Sharen was looking at me with a puzzled gaze.

I grinned at her. ‘Business never sleeps, Sharen. Not far. Sit back and relax.’

‘Will Lucie be there?’

‘Maybe later. Get you settled in first. You’re going to like it there. Anything’s better than where you were before, right?’

‘What about Rico? He’ll find me.’

‘Not this time. I’m going to make sure Rico doesn’t go looking for anyone again.’

The Swanson Institute looked a little dire from the outside. An old building clearly sold off cheaper than it would cost to knock it down. Some kindly charity spent a small fortune decorating it and bringing it up to spec, and a further fortune on Health and Safety. All before they could care for the first patient.

Inside was a different story. None of the institutionalised creams and whites. A pale blue reception felt very welcoming. No large barrier desks between patients, visitors and staff. We didn’t have to wait long before we were ushered into another room that looked more like a hotel room than an examination room. I was getting anxious to get on and get out of there. I had important things to do. But the staff took their time. They felt their clientele were important too.

There were forms and questions and I’d wished Lucie was here to handle it all. I did my best, but it would’ve been quicker if Lucie was here with all the answers. Sharen was too vague to answer the more historical questions. Like what was her second name?

I was running out of patience and time. ‘Look. I’ve been put in the position to drop Miss Sharen off here and make sure she’s all right. My wife will be along later. Can we finish the paperwork then?’

‘We must make sure we’re taking in the right person, Mr.....Gilchrist?’ I nodded. ‘We need to make sure she’s assessed properly and not someone who’s here against her will. You can understand that, can’t you?’

‘I can understand it, but don’t have the time for it.’ How could I tell this guy my wife was probably a hostage, and I needed to get her to safety – THEN we can talk about Sharen’s past life. It could wait, surely?

It took another hour and right in the middle of Sharen having a medical examination, while I waited outside, my phone vibrated. I slipped away and took the call.

‘Levy? Any news?’

‘I can’t speak to Willoughby until this afternoon.’

‘Okay, that’s not so urgent. Cameras?’

'We have two videos. A....Toni Moss. Ford C-Max. And.....' It seemed to take him forever. I knew Moss's car. I'd seen her parking it. Only one other? What about Hawk, Cruz andCosmo?

'The man calling himself just Cruz. Mustang GTO.'

'Give me the number plate. You DO have the number plate?'

There was a smugness in his voice as he said, 'Of course, Mr Michigan. Do you have the recordings you mentioned? As soon as we can exchange the better.'

I felt trapped. He wasn't going to give away information like that.

'I can give them to you first thing tomorrow. You have my word on that. But I need that number plate right now, Levy. I'm in no position to muck about. You do not want to piss me off. Number plate!'

I could feel him thinking out his options.

'How can I be sure you're going to just hand over such valuable material on just a say so?'

'I tell you what, Levy. Let me put it this way. I'll come to your office tomorrow morning with a memory stick full of information you do *not* want anyone else to hear. Or.... I can go to the police tomorrow morning and give them a memory stick full of information they *do* want to hear. I will then find you, in your office, or your home, and give you plenty of stick that you'll not want to feel. Your choice. I hang up in five seconds. One.....'

The bastard let me get down to 'four'.

'All right. No need for threats, Mr Michigan. I'm a civilised man. I can give you the number plate, or I can give you something even better. But I do need assurances from you that you're not going to trick me. I would react very badly to that.'

'Okay. You'll get the recordings. What have you got?'

'His address,' I'm not often shocked, but I was this time. And impressed. 'Although the name on the registration documents is not Cruz. Marshall Watson. I think I'd prefer Cruz.'

He reeled off the address, and I said a genuine thanks to him. I told him I'd be in touch and would give him the recordings tomorrow. I was going to. But not the originals. I wasn't stupid, letting off a slime ball like, Levy.

The throaty roar I heard as my night-time attacker drove away could easily be a big-engined Mustang muscle car.

I needed to get moving and went back into the small office and tried to find a nurse. When I did, I left my mobile number and told her I'd been called away on government service. She smiled. I smiled back. I left.

The address was somewhere on Hayling Island. Was that where Lucie was? No idea. But it was the only place I could start. I hadn't heard from him yet and knew that the ransom deal might be forthcoming. My imprisonment for the release of the hostage.

I had to decide on a detour to the farm and get more equipment and a faster vehicle or press straight on and get there a little sooner. I thought of Lucie and decided on "the sooner".

For someone to track me from my farm to the house in Battersea without being seen meant some sort of tracker. Before I left the institute, I made a careful check around the van. Using a small battery powered detector, I soon found the tracker. I threw it into a bush and drove off.

Woodgaston Lane was easy to find. There're not many houses in this part of the island. But I found the address easily enough. It'd taken me nearly three hours to get there, and the afternoon was disappearing fast. Wait for dark, or get Lucie out as soon as possible?

I parked the van a few roads away. If I had the right man, I knew he'd already seen it, tagged it and would recognise it very quickly. I had surprise on my side, I hoped. I was considering the equipment I might need when my mobile sounded. I felt fear shoot through me. I quickly suppressed it and became instantly calm. It was the phone Lucie uses to contact me.

'Hello?' I said in a neutral voice.

The man's voice at the other end was deep. I don't think he was putting it on, he was just made that way. 'Is that Jagger?'

'Who wants to know?' Delay making any statements, let them come to you.

'Yes, or no? I can end this call quickly.' He was not to be messed with.

'Yes. Who are you?'

'I'm a friend of your wife's. At least, we're becoming quite friendly.'

Suppress the dark thoughts. 'That's nice. Can I speak with her?'

'Not yet. We need to chat awhile first.'

'Put her on.' My voice was firm and steady.

I could almost see the smirk on his face as he said, 'I said.....' I broke the connection.

Pulling out a small pre-packed bag I slipped the strap over my shoulder. I started to jog to the address. I put the phone on vibrate and it was vibrating all the way to the house. I stood at the end of the long front garden, hidden behind two large poplar trees.

It was a dormer bungalow with a large area of grounds. It was a long distance to cover unseen. But he wasn't expecting me. I needed time.

I answered the call.

'Do not mess me around.' The voice sounded angry.

'I dropped my phone. I want to talk to my wife.' I said as if anxious.

'And I said in a minute. We need to talk about what you're prepared to do to get her home safely.'

'Is she harmed?'

'Not yet.'

'I need her to tell me that.'

There was a pause. A rustling and then Lucie's voice. 'Jag. I'm sorry.....'

'Trust me.' I said calmly and slowly.

'Jag.....' The phone changed hands again.

'What do you want?' I said more anxious this time.

'You.'

'Me? Why?'

'You *are* the Magician, aren't you?'

'If you want me to be. Everyone else seems to think I am.'

'You are. I'd like you in one piece. That's what the bounty stipulates. But I don't mind the "Dead, or Alive" bounty principles of the old west. Your choice.'

'Name your terms.'

'All in good time.' He wanted me to stew on it. Good. I could work with this egomaniac.

‘Please....’ More anxiety, but not too much. ‘I want her back safely. If you harm her.....’ I left the empty threat unfinished. Feed the ego, stroke the macho testosterone.

‘Just do as I say, and all will be well. For her anyway.’

‘Christ!’ I said in a panic.

‘What?’ He said slightly thrown off the butch conversational tone he’d adopted.

‘My batteries. They’re going. I’ve got to try to find somewhere to charge.....’ I broke the connection. Now it was his turn to stew. I turned the phone off, so he wouldn’t get any sign of an active phone.

An hour before dark. I would stand a better chance if I could wait. Would he harm Lucie? Who knew, the man was possibly unbalanced. Who wanted to kill the bounty when it was only valuable if it went to trial? It was a gamble I felt I had to take. Just in case, I needed to get nearer as soon as possible. Any screams from her and I could move in quicker.

Using another of my mobiles I called up Google earth and looked at the layout of his house. Another large garden at the back, leading down to an inlet which led out to the Emsworth Channel and finally to the English Channel.

His garden ran straight down to a private beach area. Maybe mud rather than a beach. Still, a long way to go without being spotted, especially if he’d as many security cameras as I have. I didn’t know enough. I was getting frustrated. There was a life at stake here and it was my wife’s. I’d no doubt this guy would pull the trigger without hesitation. I could not risk that.

Dusk was falling, it would be dark in about half an hour. I googled Cruz’s name. Very little. Penelope Cruz, Vera Cruz, Cruz Beckham. The name means Cross in Spanish. Iberian originally. Was he Iberian? I didn’t think he was a person that welcomed publicity, or fame. The name Marshall Watson produced nothing. I gave up on the name search.

I looked again at the house structure. Solid concrete walls, a slate roof. Probably built in the fifties, judging by the style. Dormer roof put on about...ten years ago. Was it alarmed? Most probably. While he was at home? Possibly. Bulletproof windows? Unlikely. Was he there now – with Lucie? Too many imponderables.

Game plan?

Exit strategy.

None.

He has to be taken down quickly. No messing about. No more return visits. On the other hand, there was retribution to be considered too.

I'd made up my mind. Lucie first, retribution second. Plus, the third option, the finality of it spurred me on. But I decided I had to wait until dark. Another twenty-five minutes at a guess. I leant against the tree and tried to be patient.

Something caught my eye. Something moved against the tree next to me. Someone was coming out of the dusk and standing looking at me. Arms stretched out wide in the "I'm defenceless" pose.

Toni Moss!

A day for surprises.

'Are you Michigan?' she said quietly.

I looked around and tried to keep the surprised look off my face.

'Who are you?'

'You don't know me. I've been sent to....keep an eye on you.'

'What! By whom?'

Moss seemed uncertain how much to tell me. She took a quick look at the house and hurried over. She had to hide behind the same tree as me and so we were very close.

'Jacob Levy. He said you had something for him and you **must** give it straight to me.'

'You're a courier from Levy?' I said more amused than surprised.

'I suppose so.'

'Why you?'

'I think I was the only one available.'

'Who are you?'

'My name is....wait a minute. I recognise those whiskers and wig. You're....' I waited until her sharp brain sifted through all the information she had, all her recent memories. The three cherries dropped into a row.

'Jagger Gilchrist?'

'No, Tay Ya Michigan. Who is Jagger.....?'

'Don't give me that crap.' She stood silent and watched me. She looked towards the house again and back to me.

‘What the fuck are YOU doing here?’

‘Same back at you, whoever you are.’

She seemed to pull herself together and took a moment to think. ‘I’ve been thinking about what you said, Mr Gilchrist.’

‘Really.’ I said casually. I looked again at the house to see if she was standing in the open. She wasn’t, she’d carefully placed herself so only I might see her.

‘I think I’d trust you and Lucie more than Levy, or Willoughby.’

I realised deception would only go on for so long with this woman. ‘How very smart of you. In the meantime....you’re here. How.....?’

‘Funny you should ask....’

‘I’m not laughing. I don’t think I’ve time for chit chat.....’

‘I know who’s in the house, Jagger.’

‘Really? So you’re really here to help Lucie?’

‘Lucie? She’s in there with....Cruz?’

I saw the surprise on her face even in this poor light. ‘Who did you expect?’

‘Just, Cruz. Levy said.....Levy called me and said he needed eyes on a Ta Ya Michigan. Whoever that is. And I find you’re here. And you’re him. Why are you pretending to be.....?’

‘We can talk later. I need to concentrate on getting Lucie out of there.’

‘What’s she doing in there?’

‘Cruz has kidnapped her, holding her ransom for me. Well.... not me. The Magician.’

‘Oh....back to that guy. How can I help?’ I was about to dismiss her offer out of hand, then realised beggars can’t be choosers. ‘But I’m no good with guns and violence.’

‘No? But I am. If you’re willing to help, I’ve an idea. But it may be risky. Any problems just run. Okay?’

She nodded. ‘By problems you mean....guns?’

I shook my head, ‘Not if you can talk as well as I think you can. He doesn’t know who you are, and he’s not expecting any unwanted visitors.’

‘I could Taser him?’

‘He may be too quick for you. No offence, but I’ve seen this guy move. Here’s the concept.’

We spent a valuable few minutes discussing her role. Then a quick research of the area via Google to find some salient points to add credulity to her story.

We agreed on an exit strategy for all three of us and decided how to communicate. Toni was a very bright woman, fast on the uptake and clearly some experience in handling tricky situations.

Toni had called my mobile phone and I left the line open. I picked up everything that was said through my earpiece. I told her to step well back from the door if he opened it. Look as non-threatening as possible. Dizzy new boat enthusiast, don’t have a clue.

I needed a full minute before she knocked, so I made my way quickly down the side of the solid and high garden fence, towards the sea. As I passed the end of the building, I heaved myself up and took a look at the rear of the house. Two large windows and double sliding patio doors. Nothing I would break into without a lot of noise.

I had an idea.

‘Hold everything, I need to get back to the van. Hold for five.’ She acknowledged, and I started the run back to the van a few streets away.

I knew where everything was in the van. All neatly put into crates, or racks, or on shelves. I found what I was looking for and hefted the two heavy crowbars. I ran back to the bungalow, to wait at the same spot, in line with the end of the bungalow wall and said, ‘Go.’

I heard a faint doorbell sound coming from inside the house and being picked up by the microphone in the phone in Moss’s hand. It seemed an age before anything happened. He was being cautious, understandably. Or he was not in. What to do then? There was a rattling of chains. I thought I heard a movement. Then Moss’s voice.

‘I’m terribly sorry to disturb you, but I’ve called on all your neighbours. Frankly, some of them were very rude, but I do appreciate people don’t want to be disturbed, especially at supper time.’

If he’s opened the front door, then the alarms must be turned off. I threw the two bars over the fence and heaved myself up and over in one single movement. I hit the ground picked up the two bars and ran to the sliding glass doors. The security lights came on and flooded the garden with light. I just hoped Moss held Cruz’s attention. If he looked around now.....

How long before the security lights went off? I couldn't risk the delay. I pulled out the Glock and shot out the two lamps. The silencer allowing the slightest of coughs in the night air. Darkness reigned again.

I could now see inside. The first room was the sitting room. It had a few sidelights on and a TV was showing some sports programme in the corner. In the chair nearest the window, I saw the back of someone's head. I'd recognise it anywhere.

Lucie.

My heart missed a beat before I got my emotions under control again. Quickly into the zone, the mission not finished until the last detail was completed.

Further on from the room was a hallway in darkness. Past that was the front door and I saw the shadowy figure of a man. It might well be Cruz, silhouetted against the security light that had come on outside the front door. I couldn't see Moss, because he was so big, he blocked the door. I knew I didn't have long.

I was listening to Moss ramble on, not letting him get a word in. I had to hurry.

Despite all the security measures you can put on sliding doors, they all operate on the same principle. The door is pushed up into a deep slot in the lintel, then let down gently onto the runners on the floor. You can lock the door from the side, but two crowbars heaving the bottom of the door out of the runners is a simple operation. It's heavy, but with a little technique, first one end then the other, the whole door was soon resting outside the runners. I lifted it and placed it to one side against the wall.

'What do you want?' the voice as gruff as before, but with added attitude.

'Well.....I need a mooring, just the short term for my little boat. I see your garden runs to good access to the Channel.'

'No. I don't have any...'

Although I'd hardly made a sound, I saw Lucie's head try to turn around to see what was happening behind her. I hurried in, keeping an eye on Cruz at the front door. Near to hand, I had my silenced Glock, not wanting to take any chances with this man.

When Lucie saw me her eyes went wide. I put a finger to my lips and quickly cut away the cords around her hands and ankles. There was a clean handkerchief wrapped around her face, covering her mouth. I pulled it off and slipped it into my nearest pocket. As soon as she was free, she wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me hard.

I pulled her away and turned her towards the large open hole in the rear of the house. I pushed her, and she trotted happily to freedom.

‘Please listen. I’m prepared to pay well over the odds. I’ve a berth booked for six months’ time, but nowhere to put little “Poppy” anywhere. I can’t have her at home.....’

I tuned out briefly while I pointed towards the fence and Lucie nodded. We made the fence and in the dark, it looked smooth and difficult for her to climb. There were plants growing up it, but nothing strong enough to hold on to. I spotted a few garden chairs and picked one up, placed it hard against the fence and pushed Lucie up on it.

She rolled onto the top of the fence, lying on her stomach and managed a grin at me. I stood on the chair and put an arm around her shoulders, then as she slid over the top, I pushed my arm under her armpit. I helped take her weight as I lowered her down to the ground.

‘Go to the end of this fence and wait for Toni to find you.’ I pointed towards the front of the house.

‘Toni?’

‘Go.’

I waited until she started to move and went back into the house.

Lucie’s chair I moved, so that it couldn’t be seen from the front door. I sat in it and concentrated on the conversation that was still ongoing.

I’d no way of communicating with Toni without Cruz hearing. So I just had to wait.

‘Well if you really don’t think you can help. Perhaps I’ll try a few more of your neighbours. Most sorry to trouble you. Bye.’

I ended the call and sat with the Glock in my lap. How long before he registered it wasn’t Lucie?

The answer was - very quickly. As he was walking back into the room, the chair having moved was a warning for him. As he walked through the doorway, he saw me and reacted at what seemed to be the same split second.

He dived sideways and got off one throwing knife that sliced through my upper arm. As I saw his reaction, I was already falling to one side and managed to get off several silenced shots, knowing one or two had hit.

I ignored the growing pain and was aware that blood was running down my arm. There was too much light in the room. With two quick shots, I took out the side lamps. Now it was dark. I was on my back, gun held in my injured arm and pointing at the sofa where Cruz had dived behind.

Pulling out the handkerchief that had just gagged Lucie, I pushed it through the cut in the jacket and onto my bleeding arm. I'm obsessional about leaving my DNA anywhere, so was determined I would leave none of my blood behind.

I never took my eyes off the sofa while I did this, the Glock steadily pointing just above the backrest. He had to move sometime. When he did, he didn't know where I was. I knew he was wounded, so mobility might be a problem for him.

He took the direct approach and popped up over the top to fire. I had one chance and took the shot. His hand erupted in a mass of blood and tissue.

He yelped in pain and surprise as he fell backwards. I was up and round the back of the sofa before he screamed for the second time. He looked up to see the Glock aimed at him and all fight left him. He was squeezing his hand and trying to staunch the blood from two wounds in his leg.

I scanned the area and notice a bag of tools he'd left there. I suspected that was where the gun had come from. He wasn't well-armed indoors, just a knife. To frighten the captive.

He struggled to speak, 'How did you.....?'

'I'm a little pissed at you for attacking my wife, breaking into my home. But disappointed in you for trying to chase a ghost.' I said, trying to hold back my anger. 'No more Mr Nice Guy. No more haunting. I can't let you live. For my sake, or especially my wife's sake.'

I put shots through both his knees and the good elbow. He screamed again and now had nothing to hold on to his wounds. The pain must have been horrific. The pain was beyond screaming for him.

I rummaged through his equipment bag. I had on my super thin rubber gloves and had no fear of leaving prints. I checked the flow of blood from my arm and noticed it was welling up a little. I pulled out a small field dressing from one of my many jacket pockets and took the time to push the compression bandage and stop the bleeding. It would have to do short term.

The bag was interesting, but I didn't have time for it. I could see Infra-red gear in there and knew this guy was no amateur. I picked up the handgun lying by his side and looked at it. I'd never seen one of these but had read a report on it a while ago. A suppressed Steyr M-1A with a laser pointer. I dropped the mag and noticed an odd round in it. I pushed it out and realised, even in this dim light, it was some sort of tracer bug. Similar to the one I'd dug out of my van's bumper a while ago.

I pushed it back into the mag and slid it back into place. I racked the slide and the trace bullet was now in the chamber.

Cruz was watching me with pain in his eyes. Trying to find the words that would stop me from killing him. There weren't any words. Though he didn't know it yet.

With slow deliberation, I pointed his own weapon at him and waited. Five, seconds, six, seven....pop. Another scream from the condemned man as the bullet entered his shoulder.

'If I could be bothered, I could track you all the way to hell.' I said.

And put the next round through his brains.

I pushed my own weapon back into its holster and checked I'd collected the two crowbars. I took a last look around and walked out the front door, closing it quietly behind me.

I turned left out of the front gate and called Moss's number.

'Hello?' she sounded nervous.

'Is Lucie there?'

'Sure. Hang on.' Sounds of the phone being passed.

'Jag? Are you all right?'

'I'm fine. How are you?'

'Fine. I was so.....'

'Did he hurt you at all?'

'No. Nothing. Really, nothing at all. He was just after you. What's happened?'

'Very little. I've persuaded him his hunt for me is over. He saw sense at last. Let's go home, shall we?'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TONI

I was surprised to receive the call from Levy.

At first, I thought it was for an update. Then he came to the point. And told me a pack of lies.

He believed that one other Bounty Hunter, a man by the name of Cruz, was about to get hold of the Magician. Levy felt that an associate of the Magician, by the name of Michigan, was trying to stop Cruz. So....as a Hunter I might be interested in getting down there and seeing if I could tag the Magician for myself. As a return for this favour, would I collect a package Michigan had for Levy and get it straight back to him. Don't take no for an answer.

I had a whole bunch of questions for the tricky bastard, but he'd anticipated them all.

'Look.....there are lots of bounties to go around you all. If Cruz does get the Magician, I'll see you get half the bounty. However, an equal concern to me is the evidence that Michigan has, that I need to defend my client. So, I can offer a hundred grand for its safe delivery to me here, tonight.'

I had to think about this.

'There are other people who might be interested, but they're currently too far away and time is of the essence.'

I knew it was all hokum but still intrigued by what the evidence was, and who was this Michigan guy?

Since my talk with Gilchrist, I'd been thinking through all the information I'd collected on this case. There were certainly some oddities and things needed careful following up. Overwhelming was the true reason behind offering a large bounty that could not be collected. At the heart of that was, Levy. And here was Levy offering me a side contract to the main mission.

I had to agree. What's a poor girl to do? He seemed suddenly animated and gave me an address and plenty of warnings about the danger of the type of people I could expect to come into contact with. It was the person I was talking to I thought posed the most threat. But I didn't tell him that, of course.

To maintain credibility and to further enhance the bad reputation us Bounty Hunters have earned, I asked for cash on delivery. After a suitable

hesitation on his part, he agreed. Like fuck, I'd get it though. Once he had his package, he wouldn't worry about payment.

As I spoke to him from my flat in Sutton, I was already getting ready to leave. I always have a small bag packed for at least one overnight stay and another backpack for any specialised equipment I might need.

By the time Levy had agreed to my terms, I was opening the car door and getting ready to leave. I tapped in the address on the sat nav and drove off, heading for the A3. Under two hours later I was driving over the bridge to Hayling Island. Here the traffic slowed me down as it was the tail end of the rush hour.

It took another ten minutes to find the road and then park. It was getting dusk, and I slipped on the backpack and walked towards the house I thought was the right address.

It looked a largish bungalow with an upper floor extension. Dormer, do they call that? Don't know. Have always lived in a flat myself, top floor when I could get it. I could smell the sea and hear it to the south. The front door faced north with a long front garden and a cute picket fence and a gate leading on to the road. Outside that fence was a row of trees. Two large ones were either side of the gate, tall ones. Never good with trees. Unpopulas, or something?

I approached carefully and saw something move by the furthest tree. As I saw the man, I think he saw me. Not one to initiate violence I spread my arms to show I was unarmed. I don't run from violence, have been known to commit violence, but don't endorse it, or look for it. My Taser always easily to hand in my front jacket pocket.

I was expecting to find a man called Michigan and assumed it was him. He didn't say yes, or no. I moved over to him. The light was already poor. I like to know who I'm talking to. I told him outright why I was there, and he seemed confused. Then I became confused. Then surprised.

There was something about him I felt I'd seen before. I'm good with remembering clothing and suddenly I had visions of Jagger Gilchrist, the night before. Same sort of hair and puffy cheeks. Podgy waistline and heavy clothing covering it all up. My eyes were caught by the flash of a shiny tooth in his mouth. I assumed real gold. As I looked hard at the man in front of me, the eyes gave him away. There was an intensity there that Gilchrist had in abundance.

I challenged him, and he gave a lot of crap, but I knew it must be him. But why was he here and pretending to be someone else? I really needed to know now. But instead, I rambled on about his proposition of the night before. Before I knew where the conversation was going he dropped the bombshell that Cruz had kidnapped Lucie.

That took all other considerations away from my conscious thoughts. I offered to help, what else could I do? I liked Lucie. I'd only met her briefly, but she was a sharp and interesting woman.

Gilchrist was a sharp and interesting man too. Especially when he let slip, he was good with guns and violence. Doubts about him and the Magician being the same crept back into my mind again.

Against my normally cautious persona, I found myself wanting to do everything he asked, without reservation. Was I being led along a path here? I didn't think so. He didn't know I was coming and looked genuinely shocked to see me.

I had to play a role and I'm quite good at that. From school plays to Am Dram in my teens, I understood the basics of performance. Establish a character, sell it and maintain it until the curtain falls.

We both felt we had little time to rehearse or research, but we spent a few minutes doing both. I was conscious of the time ticking and I thought back to the last, and only, time I was involved in a hostage situation.

I'd run to ground my quarry, but her husband had held his own wife hostage. He was confused, the police surrounding the house were confused and even his wife became confused. After several hours at knifepoint, the woman said she would prefer to go back to prison for a few months than spend a few more minutes with a madman with a knife at her throat. I think we all agreed with that, except her husband. High on drugs and vodka, the police eventually snuck in the back and laid him out.

I got paid promptly, and she divorced him six months later, then remarried him a year after that. Three months later she was dead, and he was in prison for life. It sometimes all seems such a waste of everyone's time, doesn't it?

I began my breathing exercises as I used to do before going on stage. It was a very long time ago, but these moments are etched in your memory forever. Anything that has almost total fear attached to it, will never be forgotten.

I was ready and so was he. Then he wasn't, he had to get something. Then he was ready, and I had to be, whether I was or not.

I rang the doorbell.

The next few minutes were a blur. I mumbled on about mooring my little boat and describing it in detail to someone who's not in the slightest interested. He wanted to get rid of me quickly, but in all fairness, was never rude, or slammed the door in my face.

He managed to interrupt a few times enough to say he was interested in my plight and couldn't help. But I was fortunate, some people would disagree, to have the gift of the gab as they call it. I could talk for Britain.

The conversation ran its course and the man at the door managed to find a way of closing it in my face without actually insulting me.

I waited until he had fully shut the door and the security light outside had gone off. I casually walked around the side of his property to where Gilchrist had run off to. There I saw a crouching figure and hurried towards her.

We hugged briefly, and I led her away to my parked car. We were silent until I had her in the passenger's seat and had locked the doors.

'What the fuck was that about?' I asked.

So she cried.

No point in interrupting that kind of flow. I know, I've been there. Many times. Too many times. The call from Gilchrist stopped her briefly. She spoke to him and managed to hold it together until I took the phone. A fresh outburst seemed to be the thing for her right then.

Gilchrist suggested we made our separate ways to a rendezvous point. He gave me the address, and I typed it straight into the sat nav. 'Take a circuitous route, Moss. We may still be followed.'

'Okay boss.' I said with a wink at Lucie.

'I don't know how to thank you, Moss?' Gilchrist said.

'I'll think of something. You can start by calling me, Toni.'

'And you can call me, Jagger.'

'Why?'

'Because that's my name.'

'Oh...I see. Not a nickname then?'

The journey took forever. At least it gave Lucie time to recover and to offer her profuse thanks for my help. I was beginning to get irritated by this gratitude. I'm not used to it, I work alone and don't get compliments. Sometimes from my clients. Sometimes. They think payment is enough of a compliment. It kind of is.

We talked in short bursts, Lucie's emotional level was very low. She told me everything that had happened to her until Gilchrist rescued her.

'What do you think he did to Cruz back there?' I had to ask.

‘Whatever he did, it wouldn’t be bad enough for me.’

That said it all, and we dropped the subject.

We met Gilchrist under a bridge somewhere in Putney. We needed a plan to proceed. I was unsure where this left me. I wanted to know what was expected of me now. We left the vehicles and found a café just off the riverbank. It was almost ready to close, but we bought tea and cakes and they let us stay for a while.

In the light, I could see blood on Gilchrist’s sleeve. Lucie let go of him long enough to look for herself.

‘A scratch. Literally. I’ve stopped it and its fine. How are you? No bruises, or anything?’ He held Lucie’s hands like they were lovers. It was warming to see, especially after everything that had just happened. I was only just flushing the last of the adrenaline out of my system.

‘He treated me well, Jag. Really. It was just...so frightening. Unexpected.’

‘My fault. I shouldn’t have left you alone. It’s me he’s after.’

I stuck my two pennuth in, ‘If he was purely after you, he’d have shot a tranquilliser into you as you walked to the house door. That’s what I would’ve done.’

‘So glad you didn’t.’ Gilchrist said with a smile. He turned back to his wife. ‘I want you in my sight from this point forward. Okay?’ She nodded. He turned back to me.

‘Thanks again. Sorry about ...last night. You know....’

I waved him off. ‘No probs.’

‘When I saw you taking photo’s I waswhy were you taking photos?’

I shrugged. ‘To tell the truth. I was unsure about the whole set up. I really didn’t think I’d find anyone in there. I was sure other Hunters had tried too. But when I saw two people asleep in bed....I had doubts. My main object was to get proof the Magician was in the house. So I would take some low light level photos and see if the faces matched the wanted posters. Stupid in the light of our conversation after that. But at the time....’

Lucie leaned forward and said, ‘So you were ONLY going to take photos?’

‘Surewhat else could I do? I needed some sort of positive identification. Call in the police, or let Levy do that. Let him look the fool if I was wrong.’

‘And you’ve not told Levy any of this, yet?’

I shook my head. 'But it raises questions though.'

'Such as?' he said, the smile gone.

'What happens now? Levy and his package? What do I do?'

He thought for just two seconds before saying, 'What exactly is he expecting you to do?'

'Bring a package to him tonight. From you....or Michigan...whoever you are.'

'Then you can deliver to him the same package we discussed last night.'

'I thought I was supposed to give that to the police?'

'Right now, we need to keep Levy stable. Did he say he'd asked anyone else to help with tonight's drama?'

'No. Who could he?'

'There are at least two more Hunters out there. They're out there somewhere. We need to be extra careful.'

I said. 'Hence the tour of London to get here. He said he had others, who were too far away, whatever that means? So where do we go now? I mean right now. They look like they're going to throw us out any minute.'

Again that flicker of thought across the eyes and mouth line.

'We can't risk the farm, but we can risk my warehouse. Half an hour from here. We'll all go and settle in there for a few days. Regroup and assess the situation. Tomorrow, Toni, you go and deliver Levy his expected goodies and get paid, if you can. But I need to meet with him first.'

He drained his cup and looked at Lucie. 'I think we have to change plans slightly.'

She looked up tiredly, 'Why? What?'

'You're not safe with me, you're not safe without me. What are we to do? I still think if you went to the Kobays, you'd be safer. They'd protect you, should anyone after me comes after you first. Like this moron, Cruz. I don't think anyone would be too keen to go through all that trouble, travel to Hungary, capture you, or entice me over there.....why bother?'

'The reward.' said Lucie with steel in her eyes. 'The fucking reward! I don't want to go abroad. I told you.'

She reached out for his hands. 'We're in this together. That kind of separation might tear us apart, Jag, and neither of us wants that. We survive together or die together.'

I felt moved, and that's rare for me. I was beginning to like these two and felt for their plight. I had to say, 'If there's anything I can do, please include me.'

Lucie looked at me and smiled her thanks and looked straight back at Gilchrist. 'We face it together and come through it together. That's the only way. The only way I see it.'

Jagger said, 'That's your strategy then?' She nodded.

'Okay, we'll work with that.'

PART THREE – A STRATEGY CHANGED

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LEVI

I was so angry that Michigan had changed his mind about Willoughby's recordings.

He was determined to meet with Willoughby and wasn't going to part with the recordings until he had. I had no choice. It took a while to set up, but as his lawyer, I had the right to see Willoughby. Michigan could only be a visitor if I was there too. That's what I told him.

Early in the morning, we met in the internal office of Wandsworth Prison, where inmate and legal representatives can have some privacy. While we waited for Willoughby's arrival, Michigan began to give me a hard time. He never raised his voice or used insulting words. He just expressed his displeasure at me interfering with an investigation he was making involving the Bounty Hunter named Cruz.

Michigan carefully explained what he thought our agreement was and said I'd broken it, putting into doubt his side of the commitment. I was silent in frustration.

I was becoming more to believe that this man Michigan could also be the Magician. Part of me wanted to believe that. The other, more logical part knew he couldn't be. I would observe and be careful what I said. This man had something I desperately wanted. I couldn't show him how desperate, otherwise, his price for delivery would just go up.

I told him that apart from Hawk the other Bounty Hunters were running blind, and I tried to explain I did it to help and protect him, sort of backup. But the stupid woman, Moss, asking for the digital recordings on my behalf belied that excuse. I had to admit I had no real answer. He thought I'd screwed it up; I don't. What was he doing down there, anyway? He never said what was so important about Cruz, anyway.

I was about to ask him when the cell door clanked unlocked and Willoughby walked in. He looked a little thinner and five years older. Prison didn't suit him, and this was his second visit. Deep in my heart, I knew he was not going to come out, ever. Looking at him, I think he thought the same.

Willoughby looked at the two of us and smiled, as he sat down. All in silence. We had asked for this meeting, not him. He waited to see what further problems he was to have to endure.

'How are you, Willoughby?' I had to start somewhere.

'I've been better. A lot better. Are you both here to get me out?' his smile was what I could only call, wry.

'Do you need anything?' Michigan said with an expressionless face.

'Just my freedom. I don't see you giving me that, Michigan. Why're you here? Levy said it was important I saw you.'

Michigan fidgeted in his seat. I'd not seen him anywhere near nervous before. He took his time and said, 'I'm begging you to drop the bounty. It won't do your cause any good and its...proving problematic out there in the real world.'

'Tough. THIS is the real world, Michigan. You should try it for a month or two.' Willoughby's face had hardened, showing up more a sallowness that was far from his normal colour.

Michigan maintained his expressionless face as he said, 'You know the Magician is never going to get caught and put on trial, let alone be found guilty. There's just no evidence.'

Willoughby pushed his head backwards and squeezed his eyes shut. He paused before saying, 'Yes, but he's still my main distraction. As long as there's any doubt I committed these crimes and the Magician *may* have, I've an anchor for my defence. Even if I lose the case, I'll never drop it. It's now such a vital part of my stand on my innocence. If I dropped it at any time, it'll be like an admission I was guilty. Even if I go to prison, I'll hang on to the claim he's out there and should be in gaol instead of me. I shall appeal as often as I can. He'll always be my main claim to innocence.' Willoughby opened his eyes and leant forward and stared hard at Michigan.

Michigan's face never changed. His fidgeting had stopped.

Willoughby said softly, 'You need to understand that, Michigan. You're fighting a lost battle here. I'm in a position where I CAN NOT back down now.'

They held each other stare for a while before Michigan twitched his mouth in what I thought might be an attempt as a confident smile. His gold tooth glistened wetly. 'You've obviously reviewed all the evidence the police have on you, including transcripts of all the digital recordings you made over the years.' Willoughby nodded.

Michigan looked at me before saying, 'Did you notice any were missing?'

Willoughby screwed his eyes up as if in thought before saying, 'No. I don't think so.'

'Really? What about any recordings of....say you and Mr Levy here?'

Willoughby's face never changed. 'No.'

Michigan leant back with a puzzled look on his face. 'Then you're either suffering short memory loss or just being forgetful. Because they do exist.'

'If you say so.' Willoughby's voice appeared disinterested.

'So...have you *not* discussed this possibility with Levy, then?'

We hadn't. In fact, I didn't want this subject raised at all. I'd assumed, wrongly, that this was a private matter between me and Michigan.

I saw Michigan watching Willoughby like a hawk. Willoughby gave the slightest eye movement in my direction. I had to put him out of his misery and stop Michigan baiting him. 'He has them and I've made a deal to get them back.'

'And you didn't tell me?' Willoughby's gaze was even and non-accusing. But his voice was.

'You never told ME.' I said, equalling his tone of voice.

I was more than a little miffed that this omission by Willoughby could've backfired dramatically in the courtroom. Getting these recordings back before the prosecution knew of them was vital. How could Willoughby be so stupid?

Willoughby turned his hard stare towards Michigan, 'You seem to know an awful lot about my business, Michigan? And there's only one reason why you can know so much about the Magician. And that's because....you ARE the Magician.'

My half thoughts, exactly.

Michigan let the statement hang and sink in, before saying, 'Actually, there are ten reasons. Ten Years. Ten years of dedicated tracking, reading reports, eyewitness accounts. A million false leads. That's why I'm an expert and the *only* expert. And in all those billion details...not ONE of them proves anything. Right now I feel I've wasted ten years. I'd be better off with a hobby.'

Willoughby was slowly shaking his head as if he didn't believe a word. Could I believe a word too?

Michigan leant forwards and touched Willoughby's hand for added impact and said, 'I've come to the conclusion that the Magician does not exist. Oh...there might have been several assassins who've been accredited with a modus operandi that was similar. And some bright detective has put them together to give a single persona for the police to chase. We need to finish this for your sake, Willoughby. And, I suppose, mine. I need closure,

you need a release. We need to concentrate all our forces into finding someone....Christ, anyone!...we can call the Magician.'

Willoughby looked at Michigan with surprise, 'You're on MY side now?'

Michigan turned his stare towards me and continued, 'My sources told me that someone, who may, or may not, be the Magician was after Cruz. After you gave me the address, I sent a *good* man down there who was compromised by some stupid woman, sent by you. If my man ever finds out it was you who sent her, he's going to want a word with you. It was all academic, however. Cruz was dead when my man got there.'

'Dead! How?' I said shocked.

'Just dead. Somehow you screwed this up, Levy.'

'But that could be the Magician that killed him! Are you going to ignore that?' I said hastily.

'No, I'm not going to ignore that, I'm going to be shitting myself that the man that killed Cruz may be after me now. And you too.'

I had no response. Was he lying?

The silence held for what seemed a long time. Slowly Michigan turned his eyes on to Willoughby and leant forward again. Michigan fixed Willoughby with a stare that I wished I had as a weapon in the courtroom. Michigan's voice was quiet, but clear and precise now. 'So...are there any other gaps in your recording history, Willoughby? Any you'd like to confess now? So you and your Councillor here can find them before I do?'

I could see that Willoughby was not holding his poker face and might easily blurt out something we didn't want the interfering and excessively knowledgeable Michigan to find out.

I said, 'That's for us to discuss later. Please get on with your business here. We only have a few minutes before we're requested to withdraw.'

Michigan dropped the stare and sat back. He spread his hands and said to both of us. 'I only mention this because, as you know, once convicted, Mr Willoughby can still be tried for further crimes. That will have a compound effect on the length of the gaol sentence. If all crimes are taken into consideration at the initial trial, an overall shorter sentence can be expected. A succession of additional trials would bring increasingly harsher punishments. It's in both your interests to get that sorted. Don't you think?'

'That's between me and my client.' I said snappily. I was trying to maintain my aloofness as Defending Counsellor.

Michigan seemed to become more animated. ‘Ahhh...here we have the crux of the matter. *How* long will you remain Mr Willoughby’s lawyer, Levy?’

‘Throughout the whole process, of course.’ I felt my reserve slipping. I stiffened my back, clasped my hands and tried to hold them loosely in my lap.

‘So you would intend. Let me remind you, Willoughby. The Magician, if he exists, has always been one step ahead of me. I’ve always been one step ahead of you. You’ve always been one step ahead of Levy, here. Let’s face it, Levy, you’re the slowest in the race. You aren’t going to reach the finishing line on this one. If that’s the case, Willoughby, you’d do well to listen to *me* in the future.’

‘Don’t talk so ridiculous....’ I was forming a whole list of reasons that those last few statements were wrong, but Michigan ploughed on.

‘Not so ridiculous if these recordings were to come to light....’

I felt a stab of fear. ‘You’ve promised me the originals....’ I felt I was being betrayed and cheated.

‘And that’s what you will have.’

‘You said you wouldn’t make copies. Are there copies?’

‘Not to my knowledge. But these come to me second-hand. I cannot vouch that copies have not been made before I received them. Wouldn’t YOU make copies, Mr Levy?’

I was on the verge of panic. I could see the anger and despair in Willoughby’s eyes. What was he thinking?

Michigan hadn’t finished, ‘And what of your financial situation, Willoughby? Where are you to get the funds to pay your honourable counsellor here?’

This was not an area of concern for Michigan. I was still reeling from his very broad hint that I may still be open to exposure from the stupid recordings Willoughby made of our private conversations.

I made an automatic response, ‘We’ve already discussed this situation and the resultant plans have met both our agreement. This has nothing to do with you, Michigan. I think it’s time this meeting was over. I have things to discuss with my client and you have a promise to honour, I believe?’

Michigan smiled and stood up. ‘I always honour my promises. Your...item will be with you shortly. Good day to you both.’

He moved to go, then turned back, ‘I should wish you good luck in your trial, Willoughby. I really should.’

He turned and waited for the door to be opened from the outside. He walked through without a backward glance. I felt a wave of relief after he'd left. There was a long silence. I decided to break it. 'Do you really think Michigan could also be The Magician?'

Willoughby shrugged. 'Who knows? Who knows anything anymore? Who can you trust these days?'

I had to say, 'You can trust me. I'll get you free. It'll take a little....time.'

'Trust you? After what I just found out? And when were you going to tell me about those recordings? What were YOU going to do with them?'

I showed my annoyance and leant forward and dropped my voice, 'They endanger me as much as you, Willoughby. Destroy them, of course. What else would I want to do with them?'

'I'm beginning to think that the skills that attracted you to me as my defence, may also be put to good use in prosecution, Levy.'

'Meaning?' I knew his meaning. He didn't trust me with his case anymore.

'I need you to prove you're still on my side.'

'How can I do that? I'm doing everything I can to get the evidence discredited. I'm still cleaning up your mess, like with these stupidly ill-advised recordings you made. They're what's going to condemn you, Willoughby. Not the lack of any loyalty on my part.'

Willoughby seemed to sag and went silent for a while. 'Perhaps you're right. I'm tired. I need to be alone, please.'

I stood and thought of the best thing to say. I wanted him to acknowledge he didn't mean what he said about trusting me. But if I forced that issue, I might get an answer I didn't want. From this point onwards we would have to be more cautious with each other.

As I walked out the door, a thought struck me.

Was that the *real* point of Michigan's visit?

After I'd left the prison I went back to the office. I'm a senior partner in the firm of Jerome, Jerome and Maury. This high-profile situation with Willoughby has helped us rise in the world of legal representation. Before that, we were a small specialist partnership, dealing with clients who had low-key, but *real* money.

Although as a senior partner, I was not included in the company name. Probably never would be, the legal world being what it is. But my standing within the company had grown. Significantly. I was getting privileges only the most senior partners and owners enjoyed. I'd felt I'd arrived.

This was all well and good. But I needed to win this case, and I was increasingly of the opinion that I wasn't going to do it. No one could win this case! So I expected my rise to fame to be short-lived.

On my desk was a note from my assistant, who'd gone for an early lunch – again! It was brief and to the point. 'Expect package delivery by two.'

I was very unsettled for the next few hours.

I got a call to say a Miss Moss was here to see me and I said to show her up. I restrained from adding "quickly".

I remembered her uniqueness from her first visit and invited her to sit down. Her stature probably made her look heavier than she really was. A pleasant face and short curly mid-blond hair. She seemed to always be smiling when I met her. She wore drab clothing for a young woman. By young, I assumed the early thirties.

Those dreadful tights women wear today, okay if they have the legs for them. Although Moss's were not bad, just...not quite right. A chunky jacket full of pockets did nothing to improve her image. I noticed she didn't carry a handbag, this was most unusual in a woman. She was certainly an oddity, I wondered if she was also gay? And now she had something to give me and I had to pay her full attention.

'I was expecting you last night, Miss Moss. That was the deal.'

'That's how I remember it too, Mr Levy. However, you sent me to collect something from a man that I'd never met. When he said I couldn't have it that night, what was I expected to do?'

'Take it from him. I assumed you were a ...capable woman, in your line of work. Not taking "no" for an answer. Isn't that right?'

'There certainly was an element of confusion. Your Mr Michigan didn't seem to have been informed of your intentions to collect yesterday evening. He wasn't there. The man who was there didn't know there was to be a courier to collect it. Hard to collect something that's not there.'

'Difficulties come with every high paid contact. Why do you think the payment I offered was so high if the task was to be so simple?'

'Had you told me about the problems, I could've anticipated them, or even circumvented them. However, your high payment came with a lack of

information and secrecy. I feel you might have misjudged the two as being compatible.'

'You asked him for the package and he said no. Anything else happen last night?'

'Such as?'

I must have shrugged my shoulders, I don't think I could stop myself. 'I don't know....did you have a conversation. Find out why he was there, for instance? Met anyone else?'

I saw a blank expression cross her face. 'What the fuck are you on about?' she said almost like a hiss.

I felt she could go around in circles for a long time. She wouldn't tell me more. I had information that a lot more went on that night. But right now my main concern was my package. I needed to get this exchange done and get rid of her as quickly as protocol dictated. 'But you're here now. You have the package?' I said pleasantly.

'I do. It was a little more work than I thought it might be.'

'In what way?' Now, where was she going? More money? Good luck with that one.

'Your, Mr Michigan, a nice man, by the way, appears not to trust you to honour your side of the agreement. So I had to wait until he called to tell me to go ahead. Only then did he tell me where to pick this up. In a brothel! Thanks a bunch! Do you know what it's like for a woman to walk into a brothel on her own? No, of course, you don't.'

She said, "Pick THIS up", meaning she *did* have it on her.

'However, here we are, where's my payment? I think I said cash.'

'Well.... I can give you a cheque.....I haven't got that much cash.'

'Then you haven't got the package, either. Give me a call when you have, and we'll exchange. You see, Levy, I don't trust you now, either.'

I knew this woman was not going to be easily persuaded to part with something she was beginning to believe was very valuable to me. I also knew I couldn't trust her....at all! She was playing a very dangerous game with me. We'd clearly got off on the wrong foot. Perhaps as long ago as when she applied for the Bounty Hunter information. I had to tread carefully with her. I put on a professional smile.

'How much was it again, Miss Moss?'

‘Long pockets, short arms and short memories, eh? No wonder you lawyers have a bad name. A hundred grand. Cash.’

‘I’ll have to raid the piggy bank....’ I said attempting to lighten her mood.

I opened the bottom drawer and tapped in the release code for the drawer safe. I picked up five bundles of £20,000. Crisp new and neat. There’s definitely something about newly minted cash. With a flourish, I threw it towards her onto the desk.

‘There’s your money, Miss Moss.’ Emphasised the word “money” a little cynically. I saw her face change, and she leaned forwards and raked the pile of notes towards her. Perhaps I shouldn’t have thrown it at her. I was getting beyond aggravated by this woman.

‘Isn’t money the whole purpose of a Bounty Hunter, Mr Levy? Isn’t that exactly what you want us all to do, a risky business for payment? Isn’t that exactly how you pitched it to me yesterday, get me this and I’ll give you money? And now you don’t like that I work for money because you have to pay me! Are you not going to pay the bounty if the Magician is caught for the same reasons?’

‘I’m offended by those remarks. I’m a respected lawyer, I’ve standards to maintain.’ I sounded insulted but knew she had a point.

‘Before I just hand this over. What’s in it?’

‘Nothing that concerns you.’

‘You see.....there I have a problem.’

‘Now what? You have the money, give that to me!’ I was losing the ability to hide my intolerance now.

‘I will, in a moment. But - right now...I’m in a law office and my mind switched to the legality of my actions. A woman’s thing, perhaps you wouldn’t understand. But I’m now a courier, and my payload is unknown to me. Now....it could be something perfectly legal. Or....it could be drugs. Does that make me a drug mule? Isn’t that illegal?’

‘There’s nothing you need be concerned with.’

‘I did think....it’s a little small for drugs. What could it be, I thought? So perhaps you could ...give me a hint?’

‘Our deal was for you to deliver it to me. You have your money.’ I held out my hand with as firm a stare as I could manage. I wanted her to know my limit had been reached.

‘Okay. Just one more thing.....’

‘What!’ Now my exasperation was getting hard to keep in check. What was with this woman? How much more infuriating was she going to get?

‘I’d like some information on the other Bounty Hunters you have going after the Magician.’

‘No. That information.....’

‘I don’t mind them knowing about me, why should they be so secretive? If they show me theirs, I’ll show them mine. What details do you have?’

‘I’m not....look let’s just stick with.....’

‘You must have started files on them, I need to know my competition. Three in all, wasn’t there, excluding me?’

‘Listen.....’ I was running out of patience and still, she withheld the package.

Was it so bad to give her the information she needed? There was pitifully little of it. She had, after all, come into near contact with one of them, just by meeting Michigan’s man at Cruz’s home. I’d sent her there. My information was that she’d meet more than just Michigan there too.

I gave her the last glare and opened one of my desk drawers and pulled out the folder. I placed it on the top of the desk and rested my finger on it. With the other hand, I stretched out my palm.

She gave what she thought was a cute smile and took out a very small package from a pocket of her coat. She rested her fingers on the folder as she dropped the package into my palm. I let go the folder, which she pulled towards her with the finger. She sat down to read it.

I pretended the package was not that urgent, or important, and placed it in a drawer and shut it. I sat and waited for her to finish and then leave.

Eventually, she said, ‘Not much to go on here, is there? You’ve more about me than anyone. Is this all you needed legally to employ these people?’

‘I don’t employ...these people.’

‘But you may be paying them. Doesn’t that mean the same thing?’

‘No, not at all. They’re paid for a service only *if* they complete the service. More...a contact. Not employment.’

‘More self-employed then, am I?’

'Time you left.' I stood and waved at the door. I thought for a moment she was going to refuse. But she gave another of her "charming" smiles and stood up.

'It's been interesting meeting you, Mr Levy. I'll see you again when I have the Magician. I hope payment will be prompt. Good day.'

Another smile and she left.

I sat down with a sigh. If any of my Bounty Hunters were going to bring in The Magician, it wouldn't be Moss, I guessed. I took the package out of the drawer and ripped off the cheap paper covering it. It was a memory stick. I slid it into the USB slot in my laptop and accessed the files on it. There were about fifty. All dated and with my name in the titles. I played the first.

It was a clear recording of a conversation I had several months ago. As it played out, I recalled the details. I listened until the end, about ten minutes, and decided it wasn't at all threatening to me.

I played a few more and began to believe there was no problem here. Then I hit one that took me by surprise. I'd forgotten the conversation, but hearing my words reminded me clearly of it.

If anyone else heard this, I would be ruined!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JAGGER

I felt I was coming to the end of a very long tunnel. And it suddenly had a dead end.

Moss was off on her mission to Levy and I knew I didn't have the time to visit Lucie's friend Sharen. But Lucie was getting very stressed by it all. I had a small Fiat, which I always leave somewhere near to the flat. Lucie can drive it when she needs to. I decided we would use that. It needed a long run. Repeated short journeys screw up a car after a while.

It took over an hour to get there and some fast talking for them to agree to meet with us. I reminded them of the financial contribution they might expect from me and things seemed to go smoother.

Normally their brand of drug addiction treatment is to deprive the patient of all home stimulation, make them crave it more than the addiction. But as Sharen hasn't any home life, they were persuaded the influence of Lucie should be a positive driving force.

They eventually agreed that Lucie should be the only visitor, and we had to settle for that.

So as the two women chatted, I fretted about the time that was haemorrhaging away from me. I'd suggested that Sharen could have the house, we wouldn't use it again. It would be a stable base for her to try for a new and cleaner life.

Lucie had promised to visit often and the institute doctor I spoke to said he saw no reason why all that should not be approved - after the treatment. About three to four weeks he estimated. In that time I'd hoped all my problems would be over too.

When Lucie came out, I saw she'd been crying. She waved me away and got into the car and we drove back to my flat near the warehouse. She gradually recovered and told me about what was said. Very little that I took on board with all the other stuff going inside my head. But it seemed that reminiscing had been the main agenda of the two old friend's conversation.

Toni was waiting for us as we arrived. I saw her at the front door and immediately I was on heightened alert. I'm still not sure about Toni Moss. I'm a cynical and doubting character and still have some concerns about Moss's involvement.

I'd suggested that Lucie watched out for any unusual behaviour from Moss. Suddenly leaving, whispered phone calls, etc. Don't go anywhere with

Moss alone unless I'd agreed to it. Lucie doesn't understand this doubt. She believes Moss has proved her value and loyalty. Yes, but so far only to her own ends.

Is she waiting for the right moment to pounce? Is she positive yet that I'm the Magician, wanted in the bounty? Is she waiting for some proof she can use to get the reward? She's done nothing on her own violation that has helped us. It could be all for effect at the moment. I had to be sure.

I'm sure the two of them would talk through the Sharen thing with more appreciation and sympathy than Lucie could with me. So it was with an element of uncertainty that I left the two women alone in the flat which I hoped had not been discovered yet. They were instructed not to open the door for anybody. Pretend there was no one in. Make little noise. Answer the phone on the seventh ring and remain silent until they knew it was me.

I'd an appointment with Willoughby and Levy in Wandsworth Prison. I focused my attention on that now, as I changed into my Michigan disguise and drove over to the prison.

I left the prison and sat in my van for a while, thinking.

It seemed that for ages I was battering away at trying to get the bounty dropped by Willoughby and still he wouldn't. After my visit to the prison and the conversation with Willoughby and Levy, I was convinced he wouldn't drop it if allowed to make his own decisions. It left me with only one option.

I drove on automatic. Taking evasive manoeuvres as I'd done for years. At one point I was sure I was being followed. It was a black London cab. I know....there's millions of them. But it just looked....I was getting as paranoid as the rest of them.

I felt my usefulness as Tea Michigan had gone as far as I could take it with Willoughby and Levy. However, there was one more visit I had to make as Michigan. I had to put into play an event I'd rather have avoided. But the combination of Levy and Willoughby made it impossible.

Orlando Stone lived in the same house, no reason not to, I suppose. But it held a few unpleasant memories for him. The first, the kidnapping of his wife and daughter and his torture by Willoughby's trained dogs. Then the subsequent investigation by the police who must have gone through the house with a fine-tooth comb. How do you explain that to your family?

I arranged to meet him away from that environment and we sat in the park on a bench. The day was warm but overcast. A threat of rain, if you can believe the weather forecasters. Personally, I don't.

He looked well and fit. I judged he'd lost a few pounds, and he smiled when he saw me. We shook hands and exchanged the few pleasantries that we found in common.

He sipped at his water bottle and sat back, looking relaxed. I was watching everyone around me as usual. Old habits die hard. Who'd really think I'd retired from this game?

'I still have dreams about...that time, you know.' He said almost reflectively.

'Not surprising. You did a really weird thing. Sticking pencils through a man's eyes and killing him, is not normal behaviour. Dreams, or nightmares?'

'Dreams. I'd a great deal of satisfaction killing that bastard. But it still goes against all my natural instincts. It's funny....I've arranged for many people to be killed but could never do it myself.'

'Until you had the right motivation. Did you tell your wife about it?'

He took another swig and nodded. 'I said the Magician did it. As a favour to the family.'

'And she believed you?'

'No reason why not?'

'I suppose so. How'd the police investigation go?'

'Okay. Rough for a week. But they didn't find anything. Do I assume you're not here just to ask about that?'

I stretched back and looked at the gathering clouds. Almost like an omen.

'Our mutual friend has a problem.'

'I see.'

He understood I meant the Magician when I called him mutual. He was sure I was The Magician, but he wasn't absolutely certain. At this point in time, nobody was certain. I didn't know how long that situation would last.

'How can I help?'

'By doing it all again.'

'What! The pencil bit?'

'No. The handing recordings to the police bit.'

‘More recordings?’ He was silent for a while as he thought it all through. ‘The police bought the fact that I’d found them and handed them in like a good citizen. They showed their gratitude by being helpful in getting my permits and license to start as a Private Investigator.’

‘So they should be. You handed them Willoughby’s conviction on a plate.’

‘So what’re they going to think if I handed more in? Have I had those all along and handed them in for some nefarious reason? It won’t look good.’

I sighed and appeared to consider the dilemma. ‘As a fledgling investigator, you’re allowed to delve into areas previously not available to you. Protecting your source would be something the police should respect and, in fact, expect. In your “search for the truth”, you backtracked the original cache of recordings and found these had been held back, in reserve.’

He was nodding.

‘Why now? What’s on the tapes that are so important now?’

I shrugged and said quietly, ‘Someone needs to be removed from their position of influence.’

‘And you can’t drop them into the local police station yourself, right?’

‘Right. Credibility and all that. You....however....have a track record. The police are convinced your last batch is genuine, and so they will accept these.’

‘If they don’t?’

I leant towards him and said, ‘These are a little different. It’s not just about Willoughby. Sure, they further implicate him. But more important, they implicate his whole defence case. The prosecuting attorneys will *love* this stuff. Trust me.’

Orlando nodded. We had a bond together, and he thought he could trust me. I hoped he was right.

‘Okay. I’ll do it. If it helps our mutual friend.’

‘It should do. On another matter....’

‘Oh...there’s more?’

‘What do you know about Bounty Hunters?’

‘Bounty Hunters? In the States, they are common enough. Why do you ask?’

‘Our mutual friend has a couple....well at least a couple....after him. Names...Nomos and Hawk. Long shot you’ve heard of them, but if you could keep your ears open for a few weeks or so.’

Orlando furrowed his brow, his dark skin glistening in the warming air. ‘I know of those two. But they’re in the States, not here.’

‘Could be the same. It’s a big bounty, it might attract foreigners too.’

‘Nomos....I met him once. He was working for a friend of mine. Nice guy. But he’s more than a Bounty Hunter, he’s an asset too.’

‘A contractor?’ I raised my eyebrows involuntary. If this was true, perhaps the stakes were higher than I’d imagined.

‘Hawk too. Now, he does work out of the States. Nasty bugger him. I hope I’m wrong and these are two different people.’

‘With names like Nomos and Hawk, hardly. Thanks for the heads up. Anything you can dig up on them I’d be grateful. Here’s my number for the next three weeks.’

I gave him a piece of paper with the burner phone number on it. No name. He would remember.

He stood up, and I did too. We looked at each other for a while then he said, ‘Give my best wishes to our mutual friend. I think of him often. If there’s ever something I can do to help him. He knows where I am.’

I was surprised at the emotion in his voice. Then further surprised when he gave me a big bear hug. He was a foot taller than me and it might have hurt.

Gently I pushed him back and said, ‘I’m sure he’d say the same too. Good luck with the recordings.’ I handed him a memory card. ‘And anything you can get on Nomos and Hawk. Take care. Good luck with the new business.’

We separated, and I walked around the park, checking if I was being followed. When I was sure I wasn’t, I headed back to the van.

I drove back in a half daze. Not enough to prevent me from scrutinising every vehicle behind me and doing several detours until I felt I could drive into my warehouse certain I hadn’t been followed.

I parked up the small van and removed all the disguises. I showered and changed into more comfortable casual clothing. I sat in my big swivel chair in front of my desk with the computer on it and stared at the black unlit screen in front of me.

Michigan was finished. I hoped forever. I wanted to really kill him off in some way. I put the disguise in the wardrobe, all neatly hanging so that it could always be put on as a complete outfit. I pulled off the gold tooth and put it on a shelf. It glinted malevolently at me as if to say you've not seen the last of me. I was getting psychotic.

I shook my head and made my mind turn back to life nearer home. I thought of Lucie and Toni confined to my small flat. I called and was relieved when Lucie answered.

'Hi, honey.' I said.

'Jag. How did it go?'

I felt further relief as it was a coded message we had agreed on. If there was a problem, she would've called me honey too.

'Not so good. Willoughby's not going to budge from his position. The bounty stays until he dies in prison.'

'We can't let that happen.'

'I know.'

'What next, then?'

'Time for offence, rather than defence.'

'Are you coming home now?'

'Already on my way.'

I spent a few moments gathering my thoughts before leaving for home. It was walking distance, so I collected the few things I needed and locked everything up. Set my tell-tales and finally got out of there. The walk back is about twenty minutes. I use the canal route, there's a bridge, where I stop and can see if anyone is following me. A few turns that doubled back on the route.

I'm used to the route that I do it almost in my sleep. Perhaps that's a danger sign, too complacent. I was on the bridge and spotted someone I thought I'd seen earlier. Big guy, dark coat.

Making my circuitous route, I kept an eye out for him. Never saw him again. Was I getting spooked after all these years? By the time I'd reached the point where I could turn to head home, I was sure I was not being followed.

I bought this flat about five years ago along with a few others. All of them can sustain a living for a month or two and can be left instantly when a problem occurs. In my past business that was always a high possibility.

All my houses have an open front access and secluded rear access. When required, I use the rear access and have everything alarmed and tactile indicators of forced entry. There are many ways you can leave little hidden signs on a door, or window, that can tell if someone's entered the building. Only I know they're there and where they are.

A simple wet hair across the door jamb if broken will show the door's been opened. Also, a simple effective method is to put a can, or bottle, inside the door, leaving the house by another door. When the door is opened, the bottle or can is moved. The intruder will not know EXACTLY where I'd placed it, but I'd remember.

Despite the coded assurances of my beloved, I never just walk into any building where there may be a problem. So I approached the ground-floor flat from the rear. I looked through the kitchen window and saw figures moving further in the house. So much for low key visibility. But then, I had called ahead.

Silently I opened the door with a key and edged inside. I stood silently listening and heard two female voices in the other room. They were low-level sounds. No tension, no emotion. I edged towards the living room door which was partly open. I risked a quick look around and saw both Lucie and Toni watching daytime TV. Waiting for me to come home.

I crept to the front door and opened it quietly. Then closed it with a suitably loud bang and walked into the living room.

Lucie, as always, was delighted to see me after I'd been on a "death-defying mission", as she calls them. Hugs and kisses. Normally I really don't mind....but with Toni looking on.....

'I'll be with you in a minute.' I said with a smile to Toni.

'Don't worry, I'll just put on some lipstick if you promise not to hold me quite so tight.' She grinned at me.

Lucie stopped kissing me long enough to say, 'Wait in line, bitch.' Grinned and kissed me harder.

Toni gave a dramatic sigh and said, 'Always the bridesmaid.....' She turned and carried on watching the TV.

Eventually, Lucie stopped and looked into my eyes with concern. Then studied every inch of my face, then looked me up and down slowly.

'Still in one piece.' I said happily.

'Yes...but you're....YOU? No disguise.' She added the last part in a whisper.

I looked across at Toni who was still watching the TV. I gently pulled Lucie into the kitchen and looked seriously at her. ‘She didn’t notice.’ I said quietly.

‘She’s seen you in a few disguises, she thinks this is just another. She won’t know it’s the REAL you. Do you mind that?’ I could see she was smiling.

Good question. Did I mind that? I’d decided that there’s a time when I must stop hiding behind characters. I was not sure this was a good time to come out into the open as such. But then, when *would* be a good time?

‘Let’s see how this goes. Everything quiet?’

She nodded. ‘Yep. That’s good, right?’

I nodded. ‘Got everything you need here?’

She looked around and smiled. ‘Now you’re back safe, I have.’

‘I meant the both of you.’

‘I know. I think it goes for her too.’

‘She’s still here. Does she not have a life she wants to lead?’

She kissed my lips gently and said, ‘We’ve talked it through. She wants to help.’

‘Why? What motivation.....?’

‘She just does, that’s all. It’s good enough for me.....’

I nodded and said, ‘Okay. But the ground rules still apply. Don’t go anywhere alone with her, without me knowing. Any funny behaviour, tell me immediately.’

She grinned. ‘Yes, sir. Now go and say hello to our new team member.’

I smiled, but still had those darker thoughts. One of us was going to be right, one of us wrong. I’m rarely wrong. However, I am overcautious.

Sitting down on the sofa next to Toni, I smiled at her.

‘Good day?’ she said with a twinkle in her eye and a smile to match.

‘Not really.’

Lucie sat next to me, making me the rose between two thorns.

Lucie was serious, ‘What’s happened now?’

I shrugged. ‘Nothing too unexpected. Willoughby refuses to remove the bounty from the Magician.....’ I looked at Toni when I mentioned the name and she smiled wider. ‘...and Levy can’t persuade him.’

‘So what’re we going to do?’ Toni said.

‘We?’ I said with raised eyebrows.

‘You don’t want to waste valuable volunteers such as me, do you?’

‘Look....I appreciate you.....’

‘Cut the crap, if you don’t want me in say so. Explain that to her.’ She nodded towards Lucie. ‘I know you don’t trust me. One minute I’m after your hide, next offering to help save it. I wouldn’t trust me either. But if I was going to take you in, I would’ve done it by now....don’t raise your eyebrows at me, Mister. I’ve handled tough guys like you before, and I don’t need a gun to do it.’

I shrugged and said, ‘If you say so.....’

‘I do say so and I say this too.....you’re in trouble tough guy. You’ve two goons after you who’re good at what they do. Fucking good.’

My expression must have changed as she smiled at me. ‘I’ve a boyfriend....hold the wisecracks on that for a while...he’s in the police force.....don’t worry, I haven’t mentioned you at all. But he’s got some info on the other hunters after your bounty. Sorry...the Magician’s bounty.’

‘What part of the police force?’ I said with a hard stare at her.

She shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But he’s got great access that’s been of use to me many times. He has an “in” on so many police force databases. Not just the UK, Europe and the States.’

‘And the Hunters?’

‘Oh, yeah. The two guys with weird names I saw in Levy’s files. Both are from the States and both are well known over there. Ryan is going to get back to me. But the point is...HE’S heard of them. You can’t treat these bozos lightly, Jagger. Not if you want to keep your lovely wife safe.’

I nodded, ‘Well....thank you for the update. I shall certainly bear that in mind.’

‘You’re going to need help, Jagger.’ Her hand was on mine and she was staring at me, I’d never seen her so serious. ‘I do want to help. I’m no good with a gun, but not afraid to have a go at anything.’

I felt Lucie's hand take my other hand, and it was clear the two women had discussed this in detail. I wasn't going to win. But I could give in on my own terms.

'Okay. Thanks for the offer.'

Lucie patted my hand, 'So....what's next? What needs doing?'

I looked at her and patted her hand back. 'I've already done it.'

'Done what?' Lucie said with a slight look of alarm in her face.

I took a deep breath and decided that there's no point in keeping everything from these two. I was going to need help, and I needed Toni to be a bodyguard for Lucie. But I know if I suggested that, Lucie would be angry. She regarded me in that sole role. But there were times when I couldn't be in two places at the same time. Not even The Magician could pull that off.

'First, I've set in motion something that'll put a spoke in Willoughby's carefully laid defence plans.'

'Like what?' Toni said, interested in me now, not the TV.

'It'll be on the news soon, I suspect.'

'Second?' Lucie still showed concern. She was waiting for the part where I said I would have to go in guns blazing. Risking life and limb.

I looked at Toni. 'This boyfriend of yours.....I need some specific information. Does he have access to Wandsworth Prison records?'

She shrugged. 'I expect so. What do you want to know?'

'I'll write it out for you and see what you can do. It'll be extremely useful. Vital, even.'

'Okay. Will do.' She said with a smile.

'So what happened with Willoughby today?' Lucie said quietly.

'Nothing too unexpected. He made it clear he'd die before releasing the bounty on the Magician. Levy had to back him up. I tried to put a further wedge between them, let's see if that festers for a while. I also suggested that if more recordings were released, the worse it would be for Willoughby. Levy was having kittens at that. Of course, he hadn't got his sticky hands on the recordings that included him at that point. It was almost funny.'

'So nothing dramatic then, at all?' Lucie said with more of a smile on her face now.

I shook my head. 'He said something I didn't understand. He said that apart from Hawk, the Bounty Hunters were running blind.'

‘Except for me.’ Toni grinned. ‘What did you mean by more recordings coming to light? Are there more?’

‘Much more.’ I said. ‘Willoughby’s recordings are like a diary of his life as a crime lord. He recorded something every day. It would take years to sift through it all. So far the police have only just the Brethren days.’

‘I hope you have them somewhere safe?’ I looked at her and she grinned. She held out her hands, ‘Not asking where. Don’t want to know. As long as *you* think they’re safe.’

I nodded. ‘So safe, even I have trouble getting to them.’

‘And safe from Willoughby and the Bounty Hunters?’ Toni asked with a wink.

Lucie seemed distracted, ‘So these....Bounty Hunters. What will they do to.... if they caught him?’

‘Hand him into the police.’ Toni said. ‘At least....that’s what the bounty stipulates.’

Lucie was still trying to rationalise what a Bounty Hunter could do to our lives. ‘And then he’d go to prison?’

Toni shook her head. ‘The police would have to prove he was the man called, The Magician. Then find charges with which to prosecute. None of that’s going to happen.’

‘So it’s all waste of time then? So, why are they still hunting us all the time? Why can’t we go hunting for them?’

‘If we knew who they are and where they are, perhaps there’s something we can do.’ I said as evenly as I could.

‘Isn’t that what you used to be so good at, Jag? Isn’t that what Toni still does?’

She had a point. But now was not the time for those sorts of tactics. ‘I’ll explain later.’

Lucie was not letting go. ‘So what have these Bounty Hunters been doing all this time? Two still left, right?’

‘At least two.’ I said. ‘Levy said all the Bounty Hunters were running blind. Except for Hawk. Why him?’

Why would Levy let that slip? Beware. Be on guard even more so. The invisible enemy without.

And maybe Moss within?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NOMOS

I can resist anything, but temptation.

The information was very sketchy, almost non-existent. But I've tracked more difficult assignments. But not away from American soil before. I'd never been tempted, but then I'd never had several million bucks waved in front of me before either.

Working for my normal employers it was always a few thousand bucks here, or there. Sometimes in the tens, rarely twenty and once in the fifties. But that's The Mob for you.

We're not allowed to call them "The Mob" anymore. Something about their human rights? Deformation of character? Pigeonholing? Somethin'. But times are hard for everyone. I suppose, the higher up the ladder you are, the more money you need to stay there. And some of these guys are way up that ladder. Consequently, the pinch is felt all the way down. Getting tighter as it reaches the bottom rungs.

The number of contracts is definitely reducing. Also, the price per project is reducing as well. It's hard to earn a living some months. The Mob is changing, hits are not the solution any more. Blackmail is the preferred option, more flexible and longer lasting. The highest-paid job I've had for some time was a quarter of a million bucks. To get wind of a contract worth up to five million is a great attraction.

It's useful in this business to be known and recognised. For the right reasons, of course. I call myself Nomos because he was a classical Greek figure, who was supposed to be the Bringer of Law. It sounded right for my profession, so I stuck with it. If the ill-educated can't figure it out – fuck 'em.

Reluctantly, I still flew coach, can't afford to waste money. Not with a wife, two kids and a mistress in Boston. Life's luxuries are more expensive than they've ever been. It's a long flight. I fidget a lot. The movies I don't understand. What is CGI anyway? Something that's not there – then what's the point? I just don't get it!

Never drink alcohol, so I don't get the big jet lag some travellers do. So I was off the plane, small suitcase and into a cab straight into London. Well, some place just outside called, Wands worth. A prison. That made me feel really uncomfortable.

I had to wait in some Goddam unfriendly small room, with people outside the door that were equally unfriendly. I sat and waited. Couldn't help thinking I might be on the other side of those doors one day. Goddamit!

It took nearly an hour before my client eventually arrived. He looked tired. I mean, what had he done today to get him so tired? He was a tall guy with receding light brown hair. Close together eyes that were a little unfocused at the moment.

He sat and looked at me until the guard had left us and shut the door.

‘Careful what you say.’ Were his first words. Quiet and controlled. His eyes seemed to clear, and his head came up. He looked at me with eyes that were suddenly alive and penetrating.

‘My lawyer will give you what little information we have. But I want you to understand the situation here. I need to locate an assassin who goes by the name The Magician to be found and tried for the crimes I’m accused off. Understand?’

I nodded my head. I needed more info before I could really say I understood.

‘Your job is to find him and get him into the penal system. If...on the way...you can find evidence for his crimes, an additional bonus will be added. I’m offering you a personal contract to sort this out. There are others in the field looking, but they’ll have little or no chance of finding him. I’m hoping you’re better than them.’

‘I’ll give it my best shot. What do I have to go on?’

‘Very little. One address, no real description except a grainy photo from a CCTV and a few artist sketches. None match up. Scant details on his wife. But if you get the right man, I will recognise him. So catch him, get some photos to me and we’ll take it from there. Understood?’

I nodded.

‘Let me warn you. Several people have found this man....’ That sounded hopeful, ‘...none lived to get him behind bars.’ Not so good news. ‘He does exist, despite what you might hear to the contrary. He’s been found before. Do your best.’

‘I will.’

‘Two other things. My lawyer will be your liaison. Pass everything through him. Second, be as quick as you can. Time is vital here. Another bonus if you can do this within a week.’

‘Can do.’ I thought I’d sound hopeful after all that negativity he threw at me.

‘See my lawyer. You have his address. He’ll get you started. Good luck.’

I stood to shake his hand, but he just looked at me. He stood, walked to the door and knocked. The guard opened it and let him out, shut the door again and all went quiet.

What was that all about! I heard my inner voice say.

I re-ran everything in my head and thought the guy was just uptight about being banged up. He was desperate for anything he would hang his hat on for his freedom. Delusional was my final thought. But rich enough to pay. Why should I question that?

A few minutes passed before the same guard came and let me out. I was relieved to walk away from the building.

I hate prisons.

Jacob Levy was a strange man. I didn't warm to him at all, he was very abrupt and perfunctory. He clearly didn't like this arrangement with Willoughby and me. He was tall, bald and looked every inch in the legal profession. His clipped words and posh accent left no doubt in my mind I wouldn't want him cross-examining me in court.

All he gave me was a single sheet of paper and some images of a man and woman. It might be anyone. No help at all. The only thing to go on was an address.

'He lives here, this Magician?' I said waving the sheet at Levy.

He nodded. 'Once. A fewpeople....have been in there and have actually met him.'

'And died....' I finished for him.

'No. Not all. It's not much, but all we have. You have my office number and mobile if you need me. In the meantime, I have many things to do. Please show yourself out.'

He left me alone in the office and I sat down a little puzzled. If this was the way the Brits did business, no wonder they were becoming a backward nation.

The rented car had a sat nav. You Brits have no idea how to build roads, do you! I bet the Romans would do better. I accessed some websites via my mobile and drove into the city and made some purchases. Parking is almost impossible in the busy areas of London. I ended up in a car park that cost me as much as the car rental. Well....nearly.

I bought what I needed and carefully put the receipts into my wallet. I would claim them as extras to the bounty. Plus the airfare as well. I should've gone, first class. Perhaps on the way back.

It was a very pretty ride through the countryside on the way to Hampshire. I felt I had the time and went off the main highway and meandered through the back streets. This was my first time in England. I've been to Ireland and Holland. But this was....cute.

I stopped in a genuine English pub and had bangers and mash. I was a little disappointed in both the size and the price. But it was....okay. A coke cost me nearly three dollars!

It took me a long while to find the address, it was well off the sat nav. When I was sure I'd found it, I drove around to look for somewhere I could hide the car and go in on foot. It was a mile away!

It was late afternoon, and I thought I looked out of place pacing up and down the same lane. Someone would soon become suspicious. I eased into the woods and sat by a tree. I decided to wait until dark.

I thought through my options. There were only two. The first being to enter the house. But Willoughby and Levy had said that had been done before, some with tragic results. My second was to watch the place. That takes time and effort. I wasn't endowed with much of both.

Once dark I made my move. I pinned some equipment to two tall trees in the woods opposite the main driveway into the farm. I could just see the gate and adjusted the cameras, so they could too.

Back in the car I turned on the hand-held monitor and picked up the signal from both cameras. I activated the motion sensor controls and then set up the time frame for uploading the images to the website. Every half an hour I thought might work. I didn't anticipate there'd be much activity. If everyone that was after him knew where he lived, The Magician wasn't stupid enough to keep living there. Was he? But I'd nothing else to go on yet.

I was getting hungry and tired so decided I'd had enough of this first day. I'd notice a nice pub that had Bed and Breakfast offered. I drove back down the windy lanes and decided enough was enough for the first day.

I slept well and woke quite refreshed. The shower was a little under-powered, but did the job, eventually. I had a full English breakfast and understood why it's popular with us Americans. I drank a lot of coffee, which I thought wasn't as good as my hometown brews. But when in Rome...as they say.

I went back up to my room and sorted my clothes out. I wasn't sure how long I needed to stay, so I assumed at least another night.

Sitting on the comfortable chair facing the tiny TV, I booted up my monitor. There were no files. I sighed, but it wasn't unexpected. I would check every few hours. It was a waiting game. I went for a walk and found the village I was staying in to be charming, very verdant and compact. I'd been told everything in England is in miniature. This village certainly appeared that way.

Another pub lunch. A nice roast beef sandwich. Small, adequate, and very expensive. After three hours I was done. I called home and spoke to the wife and kids and sat in my room looking out over the rolling green hills of England

Somewhere out there lurked my quarry. The illusive Magician. What did he look like? Was he as dangerous as they said? He's a professional assassin. Well....so am I, when occasion demanded it. But he made a living out of it. He'd eluded everyone for nearly ten years. Am I good enough to find and catch him? We would see.

I decided to check the video feed again. Two files. I played them both.

The first showed the gate starting to open and a white van drove out, the gates closing behind it. It drove off down the bumpy lane. On the side of the van, I saw clearly, 'Whitton & Sons. Roofing and gutter restoration'. They'd tinted the windows, and I couldn't see the driver.

The second video showed me a man walking out of the woods next to the gate. He stood and watched the van drive away before walking after it. He looked a tall, broad guy. Didn't recognise him. I played the video again and froze it when I could see his face. I zoomed in and took a still. I sent the image to Levi and asked if he knew who he was.

Once again I needed to wait.

It wasn't long before Levi replied. He's a Bounty Hunter by the name of Cruz. He sent me all the details he had, including the man's car and home details. Levi was nothing if not efficient.

Rather than hang around a village I now knew intimately, I decided I should visit Cruz in his home. That was all I had to go on so far. I tapped in the code to the sat nav and fired up the VW.

I found the villa quite easily, it was on a small island which had only a few roads and not many houses. I found somewhere nearby to park and took a stroll along Woodgaston Lane. It felt very pleasant in the late afternoon's sun. Near the end of an English summer.

Passing the house with a quick glance I walked on. I left it half an hour and walked back again. To the north grew a scrubby patch of hedges separating a farm field from the narrow, tarmacked road. I went back to the

car and changed into some walking boots and weather trousers. I loaded up as much of the gear I'd bought in London into a backpack and hefted it into place over my shoulders. I walked from the car and found an entrance to the field.

I was soon looking through the bushes at the front of the house. I'd a camera ready and a flask of coffee. I'm always prepared to wait.

It was deadly quiet. As the sun began to set, I saw my first car, a Ford, and it slowly cruised past. A few minutes later it passed back again. I watched it go near the end of the road and pull in to park. A woman got out. She looked cautiously around. I began to take an interest. I picked up my camera and zoomed in. She walked slowly towards the house.

I became aware of movement in front of me. I looked and saw a shadow move. Someone was standing in front of one of the two large poplar trees in front of the house. Where did they come from?

I aimed the camera, but the light wasn't enough. I changed the camera settings and still couldn't get a good image. The woman now walked towards the man. I took a picture of her and it looked okay. I immediately sent it to Levi and said hurry up and identify.

The woman stopped and looked like she was introducing herself to the man. Arms open and slow moving. She joined him. I was too far away to hear anything. Now I couldn't see either of them in the shadow of the tree.

They talked for a while and then the man left the confines of the tree and went down the side of the house. It was now nearly dark, and I still couldn't see his face. My phone buzzed, and I looked at the message. Levi.

The woman was another Bounty Hunter on the trail of The Magician, named Toni Moss. Stupid name for a woman. However, we Americans are renowned for stupid names. But that's our birth right. The man might be someone called, Michigan. So what was the Bounty Hunter doing meeting someone, who looked like might be a stranger to her, at the villa of another Bounty Hunter? Curiouser and curiouser.

Only a few moments later, the man was back and heading off in the opposite direction to the way she had parked. A few minutes later he was back and moved around the side of the villa again. He was carrying something.

She walked to the front door and the security light came on. She rang the bell. There was a long wait, and the door eventually opened. In the security light, I recognised the man from the video at the farm. Cruz.

They spoke for a long time and it looked like they were going to be awhile. I eased back along the hedge and got back onto the road and saw Moss's car

right in front of me. It took a moment to plant the tracer under her bumper and get back to my position watching the front door.

They were still in discussion, I noticed a movement down the side of the house. There was someone there in the darkness. Michigan?

The front door closed, and Moss stood for a moment as if uncertain. She walked away, closed the front gate and started to walk back to her car, before noticing the figure crouching at the side of the house. She ran to it, I saw it was another woman, and they hugged.

They were just about illuminated by the front door security light. I had seconds left to take a picture. My camera silently clicked as the timed porch light went off. I took a quick look at the picture and it was fairly clear. I recognised the woman. I'd seen her face on a British driving licence. According to Levy, this woman might be the Magician's wife.

Even more curious. The two hardly hesitated and scuttled back to Moss's car. I waited for the return of the man. I needed a photo of him. I would keep an eye on Moss's car and the front of the house and had the camera ready for action. I waited.

So...Moss looked like she's a decoy while Michigan went around the back of the house. Next...the Magician's wife appears and Moss, a Bounty Hunter, walks her to her car. So...Cruz, another Bounty Hunter had the Magician's wife, and Michigan rescued her. Was Michigan also the Magician? And Moss was helping him?

This meant that Moss had found both the Magician and his wife but was somehow....on their side. Now I became really puzzled and unsure.

Another movement at the front door as it opened. Someone was coming out. Cruz, or Michigan? Soon he would be in the patch of light as the security timer kicked in. He moved so fast, he was already in shadow before the light caught his face. He walked off in the opposite direction from Moss's car. I was caught behind the hedge, I couldn't get out fast enough to follow him.

As he walked, he used his mobile. Seconds later I heard Moss start her car, and she pulled out and drove away. I headed out towards the road and in the distance heard another engine fire up and I knew it must be the stranger. I was too far behind to follow him, but I could still track Moss.

After a very torturous route, Moss and the stranger met up somewhere in the Putney area. They were parked under some road bridge where there were no road lights. It was too dark to photograph them. I couldn't get nearer, or they might see me. The stranger was driving a large white van which I recognised from the letters on its side. He was the same man that had left the Magician's home.

I waited.

Eventually, they both drove off together. I followed at a distance until I noticed on the tracker map that her car had stopped. I edged forward and saw both her car and the white van parked outside of a café. It was one of the few restaurants and bars open in the street. I saw them through the window and held back to wait.

Then I changed my mind, got out of my car and took some equipment from the trunk. I walked past the café on the other side of the street and slowly walked back past the white van, keeping it between me and the window of the café. I slipped a tracer under the wheel arch on the van. I took the time to use the van as a shield and took a few photos of the trio sitting in the brightly lit café. Then crossed the street again and headed back to my car.

I looked through the latest photos and picked the best of the stranger. I emailed them to Levy. All I could do now was wait. I felt hungry and had no food left.

They were in there less than an hour before all three emerged. The stranger left in the van and the woman and Moss followed in her car. I hung back out of sight and followed at a distance. I'd decided to follow the man, I now thought might be my prime target.

The Magician.

Again he took many detours before arriving at a destination. A quiet part of the city. Almost deserted with rundown buildings, many boarded up. There were no street lights and no movement of any kind. It had a kind of eerie silence for somewhere this close inside the city.

As he drove each road developed into increasingly smaller alleys, I dropped further back. I waited until the signal remained stationary and drove slowly forward. I came to a turning and realised the tracker was now only a few yards away. I pulled the car into a particularly dark area of the street and got out.

I walked around the corner and looked at the deserted buildings. According to my screen, the van was behind three large doors. It looked like an old warehouse. Large loading doors, with smaller doors set in them. He was in there. I had to decide what to do.

I'd found him. I knew where he was. I needed to know what I was expected to do next. Levy needed to be contacted. I sent another text asking for instructions and a reply to the last set of photos I'd sent.

Sitting in the car I rummaged through my accumulated baggage and found an energy bar to eat. I had a few bottles of water left. They would have to do for my supper.

It took an hour before Levy came back to me. It was a simple statement. The man was someone called, Tea Michigan.

Not, The Magician?

I questioned that the two men could be the same. It was Michigan who came out of the Magician's known home. I sent the text and then got frustrated waiting a reply. I called him on the mobile number I had for him.

Levy picked up on the second ring. I told him what I thought.

'Are you sure?' he appeared incredulous, and I raise my voice to show how certain I was.

'I've been following this guy all day. Now he's holed up in a warehouse, somewhere near Paddington. I can send the location if you want.'

'Yes do that. But if you're that sure.....' he wanted me to repeat it again? 'He's been in this office several times. I have my suspicions about Michigan being the Magician. But absolutely *no* proof.'

I could hear Levy mumbling somethin' else under his breath. Somethin' like.... 'I sent her to pick it up, and she'shelping him now?' Somethin' like that.

'Hello....? What do I do next?'

'Okay. I'll contact my client and get back to you.'

'How long will that take?'

'Sometime tomorrow. He's in prison, I can't just phone him. Can't just talk to him like I'm talking to you. Tomorrow morning. I'll call you on this number. Thanks for letting me know. And...er.....well done.'

'Tomorrow? He may have moved on by then. Shall I bring him to you now?'

'And put him where? My office. No! Take him to a police station.'

'If I took him to the police would they hold him? What reason would I give?'

There was a pause before Levy said quietly, 'That's funny, that's exactly what Michigan said. Take him anyway.'

'You'd have to back me up. Legally, that is. If I told them to call you. Okay?'

'I can do that. I'm the defending Counsellor and this is evidence. They would have to hold him. At least for twenty-four hours.'

'Is that all? What good will that do?'

'It gives us time to investigate who the guy really is. We can get fingerprints and DNA. No one has done that before. Even if we have to let him go because our case is so weak, at least we'll know more about *him* and the police can keep tabs on him as well.'

'Let him go! We'll never see him again.'

'It's a risk we have to take.'

'All right. I'll pick him up. I hope you know what you're doing....'

'Wait!' now the uncertainty was there in his voice. 'For now, we'd better wait on Willoughby's decision. Keep an eye on Michigan. Know where he is at all times. When you get the go-ahead to bring him in, you can act.'

Right now I DIDN'T know where he was at all times. Keep that to myself. 'All right. It's going to be a long, hungry night.'

'You're paid enough. Buy a slap-up meal tomorrow. Be vigilant.'

The line went dead.

It wasn't as long a vigil as I thought it would be. Very soon after the Levy call, the man emerged from a small door in the warehouse. It was dark, and he was shadowy, but I hoped it was him. He started to walk. He walked for about thirty minutes. I knew there was something wrong when I realised we'd been going in a large circle. I tried to hang back, but he kept changing pace. Slow, then quicker.

Had he spotted me? I didn't think so. I'm an expert at tracking and shadowing people. The trouble was, it was dark and there were few people about. I didn't have a lot of cover to hide me.

At one point we came to a bridge, and he stopped and turned suddenly. He looked right at me, I was behind a small row of bushes. I stood still, holding my breath. Had he spotted me? He waited several minutes, staring into the darkness behind where he had just walked. Slowly he turned and walked on.

It wasn't worth the risk of spooking him. I stayed where I was, aware he might double round and come up behind me. This man was a killer, I could become a target. He'd have no mercy killing the hunter. I eased away and moved back to the car.

Now I was looking over my shoulder every step of the way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MOSS

I wasn't sure whether to be angry at Jagger or just simply disappointed.

I'd thought he'd welcome my offer of help with open arms, but clearly, the bastard still doesn't trust me!

I can be a little confrontational and upfront with people. Sometimes....too much. But I'd had enough of crap talking and wanted to get a few things straight. I told him what I thought and left it to him to decide what he wanted to do.

Men think they're so tough when they can use muscles and weapons. But what's tougher than a woman's determined mind. Nothing!

I think I stopped his one-track train of thought when I mentioned that I'd a boyfriend with access to police information. He didn't know that, why should he? But it's the little details that can help or hinder. Suddenly I was a different proposition for him. So different, he was asking for help in that direction a few minutes later.

Ryan and I had been discussing it a day earlier over the phone. As usual, he was all over me to come and see him. I'd made a deliberate choice not to move in with him. I like my independence, but I like the thought that I also had a significant other in my life too. Balancing that equation is not easy, sometimes impossible. But with Ryan, it was simplified by the fact that if either of us wanted just sex, then both worlds could co-exist for a while.

We made a date the following day, and both admitted to looking forward to it. While I had him concentrating on me, I asked him about his knowledge of Bounty Hunters. I could feel him grinning over the phone. I knew he had an interest in American crime, generally.

He started to expand his knowledge, and I had to drag him back to the moment and launch my question. I gave him the names of the two known Hunters, who were on our tail. He knew them immediately. He had limited knowledge but promised to get back to me with further details.

That was enough of conversation for me. I wound out the call and hesitated to say the three words he used a lot. I put the phone down, contented that I'd said what I wanted, but disturbed that the two Hunters were *that* well known. This didn't sound too good.

When I told Jagger what little I knew, he was soon in deep thought.

I tried a more feminine approach with him as Lucie had suggested earlier. Touch is always an important part of showing trust and assurance.

When Lucie also gripped his hand, he'd a double whammy of female emotion battering at his male reserves.

Then came the connection I wanted. He recognised my potential usefulness of Ryan's skills. He later gave me a list of questions which seemed odd and random to me. But if nothing else, I was sure Jagger knew what he was doing. Even if he didn't let anyone else know what he was doing. Despite his promise to Lucie. Jagger and promises.....

Lucie had said he'd been a man alone when she'd met him. Slowly, he'd let her into his life. There was a long way to go she said, but he was getting better. I'd hate to have met him in his early days.

We talked a while longer then Jagger got up and went off somewhere. The bathroom, or something. Lucie looked at me with a quizzical stare. 'What do you think he's up to?' she said, with a look of concern on her face.

I shrugged. 'Nothing's going right, is it? He's doing his best. He's trying everything he can. Give him space. Give him room. Give him some attention.' I smiled at her. She smiled back, but it was only briefly.

'I'm frightened he'll try to attempt something that's ...too risky.'

Shaking my head, I said. 'He won't. Dumb, he ain't.'

'I'm not just worried about him. These...Bounty Hunters. What will they do to *us*?'

I moved over to sit by her and held her hand. I could feel her shaking, so squeezed it tighter. I put my arm around her shoulder and said quietly, 'We're a team. He's not on his own any more. He has help. We'll sort them out. Can you really see them taking him to the police?'

She nodded, 'Yes, I can.'

I patted her hand and said, 'Well, I can't. Even if they did, the police are not interested. There's no proof of any wrongdoing and he'd be out in hours.'

She looked at me and the tears were forming. 'What if they didn't care HOW they took him in?'

'Violence? No point. No bounty in it.' I wished I'd believed those words as much as I hoped she would. 'These people aren't fools, Lucie. The money is for a live, breathing, trialable target. They've more to fear from him, then him from them. If that makes sense?'

She was nodding, but I didn't know how much of what I said she really believed.

'It seems so pointless. Arresting someone, where there's no evidence or proof they committed a crime, why chase them?'

‘It’s all about money. Willoughby’s bluffing his case. There’ll be no payment. But the Hunters don’t know that yet. They will, when they ask for the money.’ I laughed. Perhaps not appropriate.

‘I don’t know how much more I can take, Toni.’

Giving her a squeeze I said, ‘As much as if fucking takes, girl. You’re tougher than you think. You’ve been through worse.’

‘I can’t think when.’

‘You’ve been kidnapped. You came through that with flying colours!’

She seemed to go back into her memory before saying, ‘I was initiallyfearful. Then thought.... I’d had times in my life that had been worse. Just short periods of times. The threat of being harmed, beaten up. But this was obviously going to take a while longer. Maybe days, even. But then I realised, however long it took, Jagger WOULD find me. In the end, it was only a few hours.’

‘There, you see. Sitting and waiting is hard, girl. But being in the thick of it is worse. You must have a lot of faith in him?’

‘Yes, it’s taken me all this time to have faith. But then he’s been wrong. He said all this would go away, and it hasn’t. I know he’s trying hard to correct it and doing the right thing every step of the way. But for once..... this has been one step ahead of him. Unless he can catch up with it and get ahead of it. It may beat even him. I think the end, when it comes, may be quite traumatic. And may not be in the best of all our interests.’

‘Do you trust him now?’

‘Implicitly.’

‘Then hold on to that thought.’

‘It’s not just him though, is it? It’s what’s out there waiting. None of us has any control over that.’

Having great sex with a regular boyfriend is useful when lust wins out over practical considerations. But mid-morning, during the week, did seem a little odd.

We originally agreed it was to be that evening. A meal, watch a movie, sex, sleep, get on with our lives the next day. But Ryan changed it to mid-morning, after his late shift at the salt mine. So it came down to...morning sex and get on with our lives. Not even lunch!

I didn't remember him saying he'd started shift work, but Ryan is quite insular. Forgetful might be a better word for it, bone idle more like. Ryan concentrated on one thing at a time. Mostly that thing was himself.

He had some justification, he was a very bright young man. Perhaps not so young at thirty-two, but certainly upwardly mobile in his chosen profession. Not that I'd ever got a clear description of what he did for a living. But certainly, he was a whiz at getting information that I couldn't get through any other sources. The Internet has its limits.

Good looking is a term that's applied by the person doing the looking. For me, he was more...vaguely handsome. Fairly slim built, high cheekbones, short curly hair that fell in unruly locks over his bright blue eyes. He was always smiling. Always happy. Always ready to move on to the next thing he had to do that day.

He lives in a nice flat. Single bedroom, nice outlook over the city. Not an expensive place, but carefully furnished and finished with quality items that made it a home, rather than a house.

After our six minutes and forty seconds on the bed, he was up and into the shower. I was still getting my breath back. When I was with Ryan, I usually had little to do. He made all the headway and the end result was always satisfying for me.

As I lay there looking at the ceiling, which did need painting, I thought....could this be my life? Was he the one? No, was the answer to both. But until something better came along.....

I got out of the bed, picked up my underwear and dragged them all back onto their rightful places.

My leggings seemed to have escaped me and I had to get on my knees to reach them hiding under the bed. I pulled them out and started the awkward process of getting them back on. As I pulled, a piece of material came away in my hand and I could see it wasn't part of my black tights. It was a black bra. And not mine. Far too big for me.

Who doesn't miss a bra?

I don't know why I was so shocked. Neither of us declared total dedication to each other. Neither said there were no others in our lives. Well, there certainly wasn't in mine. But clearly, Ryan had more than one person he "couldn't live without" in his.

Maybe not just one, either?

It began to explain many things. His obsession with having time for his "mates" had a new connotation to me now. Changing from evening to day, possibly meant he had someone else lined up for tonight.

I could get mad and angry. I could be upset and feel let down, betrayed. But what had really changed in the last few minutes?

Nothing.

No...one thing. I was struggling to analyse this new feeling surging through my core, into my cortex and into my conscious mind. I was glad! I felt a wave of...freedom. As I pulled on the last of my clothing, I was smiling. It'd just occurred to me that these meetings were becoming...purely functional. Was that what we both wanted? I guess it now was.

The sound of the shower brought me back to reality, and the world surrounded me once again. I stood and breathed in deeply. His aftershave hung in the air, it permeated every pore in the room. But there was now a hint of another fragrance too.

On the side table was his wallet, keys and phone. I picked up the phone. I took an overly dramatic glance towards the bathroom door and clicked through to the contacts menu.

Amy, Sand, Rach, Ems, Bim and J.

I've a good, trained memory. I recorded all the telephone numbers into my memory and put the phone back. On the table was a sheet of paper. I looked at it. Details of two American Bounty Hunters. Only they were listed under Hit Men. It sent a shiver down my spine.

I needed to get this to Jagger as soon as possible.

I carefully laid the bra across my pillow and headed for the door.

As hellos were now so brief and redundant, so goodbyes were no longer necessary.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NOMOS

I found a hotel nearby that was just about within the range of my tracking device.

It wasn't The Ritz, but it wasn't exactly a dive, either. I spent a tiring night listening for the beep that told me the van was on the move again. I awoke with a start at nine the following morning. I checked the tracker, and it was still stationary, still in the warehouse complex.

I took my time with the hotel breakfast and was vastly disappointed. This Full English wasn't what I was now used to. Half would be a better description.

Still, the dot hadn't moved. Neither had I heard from Levy yet.

That's how the day played out. At lunchtime, I walked to the warehouse, conscious that I could easily be seen. It was all closed up and deserted. I had lunch in a pub and was once again disappointed in my choice of venue. I didn't like this area at all, who wanted to live around here?

The afternoon dragged on, and I felt I had to be around the area in case the van moved again.

I tried the afternoon tea in a large hotel about fifteen minutes' walk away. I rather enjoyed it. I was particularly amused by the tiny portions of everything and the performance in creating the sculptures that were called scones. I watched the other diners, mostly women, and followed their lead.

It became a pleasant distraction for an hour. After that, I was back to walking the streets and getting bored. I called Levy, but his phone seemed unobtainable. I left a message and carried on walking.

This had not been a difficult case. It's not necessarily always the first to the quarry that will get the prize. If you have the patience and skill, you could always be the winner. I felt a sense of pride and happiness at what I'd achieved in a few days, where, apparently others had failed.

Dusk moved in and I returned to my sub-standard hotel. I was getting frustrated now. Where was Levy? Had he spoken to Willoughby yet? I called again. Left another message, slightly more urgent than the six before it. Where was he?

I watched some extremely poor TV in my room and got increasingly more uncomfortable. I decided to go to bed early but left clothing ready to get up quickly and get after the moving vehicle if necessary.

The TV droned on and at some point, I must have fallen asleep.

I awoke before dawn and went to the breakfast room. I had to wait until it opened and had a leisurely breakfast. I still felt hungry afterwards, so I took a few rolls with me and some of those tiny jelly pots.

One way or another I'm not going to spend another night in this hotel. I checked out and got in my car. It was only eight in the morning, but I gave Levy another call.

It surprised me when I heard his voice as he picked up the call.

'Levy? Nomos. Where've you been?'

'I got all your messages, but I've been busy all day. It might come as a surprise to you, but I do have other people with needs for attention. I couldn't contact Willoughby until late in the evening and after that, I was just exhausted. I felt responding to your requests could wait until this morning. So here I am.'

'I need to know how to proceed. Any news from Willoughby?'

'Not yet. I've an appointment this afternoon, then I'll get back to you.'

'What's taking so long? We have the man in our sights. I can just bring him in now!' I was getting frustrated at this pompous legal clown delaying things to suit himself.

He was thinking, I could tell.

'Is there somewhere you can....hold him for a few days?' he said, eventually.

'Kidnap him?'

'Not exactly. Just, keep him out of circulation until we can figure out what to do with him.'

'I'm not sure what I

'Just figure it out. Earn your money, Nomos. Just think of your reputation.'

'Okay. If that's what you want....'

'It's what Mr Willoughby would like.'

The line went silent. He'd rang off.

I sat in my car and thought through what I might do next. There was only one thing to do next. Go to the warehouse.

I parked a few narrow streets away and went forward on foot. I carried a heavy holdall with my equipment in it. In the side pocket of my jacket, I'd a small Taser gun. I'd bought it in a security shop somewhere off Oxford Street a few days previously. It was charged and ready to use.

In this foreign land, I had no access to real weapons. I'd have to rely on surprise and stealth. All I have is the Taser, a pepper spray and plastic handcuffs.

And my experience and wits.

The outside looked as it always did. Deserted. The tracker showed the vehicle was in the same place as last time. I could hear a few birds singing somewhere and traffic in the distance. A fire truck? Ambulance, or police? I'm not familiar with the difference in the two-tones in this country.

I'd enjoyed my visit here, all very pretty, quaint and somehow nostalgic. But overall the food was inadequate and the whole demeanour of the place was a little backward for my taste. Still, all cities can't be like Boston or New York.

I walked up to the small door on the right-hand side of the building. It was set into a much larger warehouse loading door. All were made of corrugated metal. This wasn't the door I'd seen The Magician enter the other night, it was at the other end of the building. It had a simple Yale lock which I can easily pick. There were no visible cameras up in the roof. If there were, a burglar might think there was something inside worth stealing.

After a quick look around, I unlocked the door and eased it open. I paused with the door a few inches ajar. I listened. There were no sounds inside. I might've heard something creaking, but it would be the fabric of the building. I couldn't see wires or any other sign of alarms on the door frame. I opened the door and stood back outside. No gunshots, verbal challenges, no sounds.

I stepped inside.

This place was once three workshops, turned into one open space. There were several cars and vans in there. Two motorbikes. Some sort of living area and even a gym. It was very comprehensive, very neat and tidy. No dust anywhere.

The light came from six skylights, painted over with whitewash. It was dimly lit, but enough to see that there was no one there. I started to investigate the area.

After nearly an hour I could see no signs of surveillance, or any security measures. He was very secure about this place, sure no one would find him. After ten years he'd become too complacent.

I found a spot where I thought I could hide until the Magician returned. This might not be for some time, so I'd brought food and water with me. In the far corner was a bathroom with a shower and toilet facilities. I could use that. I wouldn't be comfortable during the long wait, but the thought of millions of dollars kept me warm.

Just inside the small door, the Magician had used on the previous occasion, stood the white van he'd used a few days ago. I positioned myself behind it, with a clear view of the door for when he came in next. I pulled nearer the swivel seat that was in front of the computer and settled down for a long wait.

Sometime later my phone buzzed in my pocket and I took it out. On the screen one text message from, Brandon Forte. Who the hell was that? I put the phone back.

About late afternoon I heard the sound of keys in the lock. I stood and crouched into the firing position. The Taser held before me, steadily in both hands. I took slow even breaths and waited as relaxed as I could be.

A man entered, and I didn't recognise him. He looked younger and slimmer than the man I'd been following. That man was known as Michigan. If the Magician was the same man, this was probably him, without the Michigan disguise. He closed the door and started to walk past the van.

Once he'd passed me at a distance of ten feet, I fired the Taser. The two contacts shot out and pierced his body. The charge shot through the attached cables forming a completed circuit of high-powered electricity. His body convulsed as all the muscles contracted. He jerked himself to the ground and writhed for a moment before the electricity stopped.

I waited until he lay still, his eyes wide open in shock. I dropped the Taser and held the pepper spray in front of me as I walked towards him. I couldn't help but smile.

I'd captured the elusive Magician.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BRANDON FORTE

I was summoned into the inner sanctum of Sir Walter Neal after lunch. Owner and Senior Barrister for the law firm Jerome, Jerome and Maury. I knew I'd done nothing wrong, but it was always a nervous time to meet the upper echelon of your peers.

As I waited in Sir Neal's large oak panelled office, I was trying to keep from getting nervous. A huge ornate mirror graced one wall, and I took the time to check my appearance. I'm fairly short and proud not to have too much weight. I'd hate to look like a ball on legs, as did a few of my colleagues.

I've receding hair, which goes with my fifty-year-old age. I wear immaculate designer suits, all charcoal grey. Always a white shirt and dark tie. I've contact lenses, but often wear small spectacles, because the jury and clients expect it. I'm still quite tanned from my Antigua holiday with the wife and daughter. I wished I was back there right now.

Sir Walter was his usual perfunctory self as he entered his office and launched straight in with his reason for my presence.

'You're to take over the Jamison Willoughby case from, Levy. His assistant, Richardson, will give you access to all the files. Don't screw it up.'

I found myself back in my humble office in a daze. Richardson was waiting for me and smiled at his new boss. 'Welcome to the madhouse, Mr Forte.'

'Where's Levy?' I asked holding his stare.

'He....has resigned, I believe.'

'So suddenly?' He nodded. 'Really?' Another nod.

I sighed and said, 'Okay, you'd better brief me, then I'll brief you on my current cases and see who can take them over. Buggeration of affairs, this place.'

Richardson seemed to find the whole thing amusing as he smiled at me and said, 'I've arranged a three o'clock appointment for you to meet with Willoughby in Wandsworth. In the meantime, please come with me to Levy's office and I can let you have access to his computer and all the relevant files.'

Richardson turned on his heels and walked away. I remained seated and waited until he realised I was not his lap dog to follow when he commanded. A few seconds later his head appeared around the door.

I smiled at him and said, 'Let me get this straight, Richardson. Is it me, or you, that's been handed the Willoughby case?'

'You, of course.'

'Then I will say what and when I need to do something. Not you. Is that understood, Richardson?'

He coloured up a little and nodded. Afraid to make any spurious comment now.

I stood and smoothed down my Armani suit jacket and said, 'I think I'll look at Levy's case files now, Richardson. Please be kind enough to lead the way.'

I'd not met the infamous Willoughby before, although I'd seen him on the news, ardently defending his position and innocence. Levy had kept the whole case close to his chest. Whenever he was questioned by anyone in the firm, he always had a superior smirk on his face and held his head up high. He was preening himself for a larger office and superiority of those who were currently above him in the pecking order.

I couldn't imagine what had happened to make Neal replace Levy with me. I wasn't sure I liked the case, anyway. It seemed to all of us it was a waste of time. Willoughby was plainly guilty, the evidence overwhelming. This grandstanding offering bounties for a mythical assassin who was supposedly guilty of Willoughby's charges was preposterous.

Sitting in the outer office of Wandsworth Prison, I waited for the great man to arrive. I pondered on the material I'd looked at earlier in the day. Levy was nothing if not efficient. Everything was neat and tidy. Digital files and hardcopy. Filed in the relevant order. Readable and accessible. But the facts were still there. The evidence for the Prosecution overwhelmingly damning.

I could not raise the enthusiasm to defend this man in the same way as Levy apparently did. I began to think Neal didn't like me. This was a lost case. How could I pretend to my client and my employers I was confident of a positive result?

I'd brought with me a notepad and a few notes I'd written down. Start with a clean slate and see what the man had to say. God knows what hope I could give him!

After some time I was finally ushered into a meeting room. They'd seated Willoughby at a metal table. He was wearing a prison uniform and looked a little thinner than when I saw him on the TV last week. They say television can add ten pounds to a figure. But this man did not look well. The strain was showing. But his eyes were alert, and he held my stare as I walked in and held out my hand to him.

'Brandon Forte, Senior Counsellor. I've taken over from Mr Levy. Please to meet you, sir.' He nodded and waited for me to say something. 'I'm afraid I don't know why I'm here instead of Jacob, sir.'

He tried to smile. 'They haven't told you, then? Not surprising. Well... there are some recordings I made that have come to light. In fact, as I'm sure you already know, they're the main evidence against me. Latterly, even more recordings have come to light, which unfortunately has put Mr Levy in a rather bad light. Professional misconduct they called it. I understand he's been removed from his position within the law firm and will face criminal charges sometime soon.' Willoughby stretched his back as he continued, 'So we can forget about him and move forward with you.'

This came as a bit of a shock to me. We all knew Levy cut corners and was a bit of a maverick, but to be fired, just like that. What poison chalice had I inherited?

'I regret to say, Mr Willoughby, but I've not had time to understand fully the defence case as yet. This meeting may be a little premature.'

'No matter. There are important points I need you to understand. I can't *win* this case because of the strong evidence against me. I can only win if we can discredit the evidence or witnesses. Understood?' I nodded. 'Good. You know about the bounty I've offered?' I nodded again. 'Well, I still feel this is the way forward. Distraction and deflection away from me. We need to step up the P.R. on this.'

'Mr Willoughby, I'm not at all sure this tactic is the right...'

'I don't care what you think, Forte. I'm paying for your services and this is one of the few things I want to be done my way. Understood?'

I could only nod. My worst fears were deepening. What had Sir Neal got against me?

Willoughby leaned forward and dropped his voice. 'To that end, I've hired two Bounty Hunters myself. Levi had the details. Contact them and tell them to get a move on. We need to capitalise on Levy's departure and your arrival. I want a strong and positive image coming from my camp to say I'm innocent and want desperately to prove it. That's my stance. Can you do that? If you can't...'

I nodded, 'I can do that. I can certainly try, Mr Willoughby. But I'll need just a little time....'

'Strike while the iron is hot, whatever that means. I want you up and running, Forte. Understood?'

I felt like a nodding dog in the back of a Ferrari. I nodded.

'Let me know what you get from the Bounty Hunters. Let me know your proposals to fight this case. Win this for me and you can write your own ticket for the rest of your life. Lose it and I'll not forgive you. Go. You have work to do.'

Willoughby stood and walked to the door. Two light taps and it was opened. He left, and the door shut again. I sat back and tried to gather my thoughts and impressions. Was there no one else in the company that could take this dead-end case? Could I refuse it and keep my job? Probably not.

I was let out a few minutes later and went back to the office. I asked to see Neal, but he was out on legal business. I'd heard that excuse many times before. I sat down and started to search the Internet.

I gathered a small team to assist me. If the firm were going to give me the shitty jobs, they could damn well pay for someone to help. It took some hard research, but we came up with a game plan and strategy of defence. We searched all law agencies for any files on The Magician, or assassinations over the last ten years. Pieces slowly came together. Places and dates. Opportunities for one man to do them all, or just some. The relevant law enforcement agencies had tagged some assassinations as ones suspected of being, The Magician.

We were getting closer to showing we can prove that the Magician existed. Now we have a better chance of finding him.

I made a call to Willoughby, and it ended up more amicable than our first meeting. He liked the direction I was taking, and we agreed that the Bounty should remain. I was emboldened to suggest we increased it. It was an opportunity to get me some TV airtime.

The more publicity the better, I suggested. The more carnage outside the court the better. But suggested we call the bounty a "Citizen's Award", for the bringing to justice of a killer. An award payable for the identification, arrest and conviction of the man known to the law authorities as The Magician.

I didn't necessarily think this route would help us, but at least Willoughby thought I was doing something positive. And so, therefore, would Sir Neal, who liked a satisfied client.

I sat back in my chair and, for the first time since taking over this case, I felt better about it. We were probably going to go down on this one. But I thought how much better for my future career to go down in glory fuelled flames.

CHAPTER TWENTY

JAGGER

Yesterday I called Orlando Stone. He was frustrated at not being able to contact me.

He sounded excited and breathless all at once. 'You're a hard man to help, Michigan.'

'Sorry. I've been busy. What's the matter?'

'Those two you asked about. They're definitely over here and definitely after you.' I let the silence stretch as I thought what I could say to that. Aware he was sure I was also The Magician as well as Michigan. 'I've information that you'll find interesting and helpful. There's lots of it, give me a number and I'll send it to you.'

'Okay, use this number.'

'Look, man. Be careful, okay? These are nasty pieces of work. They're assassins, not just after Bounty. You take care. I don't want to be putting flowers on an unmarked grave, because I know your name's not, Michigan. And dammed if I'll ever know what it really is.'

'It's Jagger, Orlando. You've earned the right to know it. I'll be in touch. Appreciate your help.' I broke the connection before either of us got too sentimental.

A few seconds later the biographies came through and I felt the first cold stab of fear, which I quickly fought down. Both Nomos and Hawk were established triggermen for the Miami Mob. Been charged, but never convicted. Missing witnesses, etc. Times were hard and contracts reducing, so they were spreading their wings to Europe.

According to Orlando's source, both Hunters were aware of each other and they were both starting into the hunt late. So their strategy might be to find the other Hunter and tag onto what they've discovered so far. Nomos had been beaten to the quarry by Hawk several times before. Hawk had stolen the quarry, often at the last minute. Living up to his name and swooping in for the kill.

I'd been wondering why neither had turned up to Levi's with a car. As Moss pointed out, it's obvious. She turned up by car, so she could get on the job right away. And did. She drove straight down to my farm. They had come straight from the airport.

What would these Bounty Hunters have as weapons? Taser, knife, pepper spray. Guns? Maybe. What can be done to combat that?

Pepper spray, close your eyes, hold your breath and quickly move in close. A blind attack on a professional assassin? However, my main hope is that they needed The Magician alive.

I've been expecting them for some time now. I've installed more alarms that alert me on my mobile, so I know when someone is in the Warehouse. Pressure pads and silent alarms at various points around my sanctuary.

I've deliberately kept both Lucie and Toni away from the warehouse. This is to be the killing field and I want them nowhere near it.

I was as prepared as I could be. It was now a waiting game. And I knew that Lucie wasn't good at that.

This morning at breakfast I tried to tell her what my plans were and what I thought the outcome might be. She was reserved and asked a few questions. This puzzled me. Her normal paranoia was that everything was going to go wrong. I would die, and terrible things would happen to her afterwards.

Toni jumped in with, 'I will protect Lucie from anything terrible'. Assuming I wasn't around to. That left me the opening I was looking for.

I pushed the last of my toast and marmalade into my mouth and chewed it well before speaking. 'We're at the stage where we have to wait for them to come to us. No more hiding, skulking behind darkened doors. We're ready to go on the attack. I believe that's what you wanted, wasn't it, Luce?'

'Yeah...sort of. But only if we thought we could win. Can we win?'

'Of course, we can win. He's the Magician, how can he lose?' Toni said slapping the breakfast table and letting out a short laugh. It sounded false in the silence that followed.

'I'm not The Magician.' I said for the hundredth time. 'He's dead, as far as I know. If not dead, certainly retired.'

'Whatever.' Was Toni's response with a sulky smile.

'What're we waiting for?' asked Lucie.

'Them to find *us*.'

'Then what?'

I felt I should be truthful. 'Then I'll kill them and end all this.'

'Just like that?' Lucie said, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. 'Haven't I heard all this before?'

‘Several times. And we’re still here.’ I said quietly, knowing I was on dangerous ground now.

‘But there are three of us now.’ Chipped in Toni.

Lucie sighed and smiled at the same time. It was a gesture that looked pathetic and sad. Toni moved across to her and put an arm around her shoulder.

I said, ‘I think this is the only way. Or would you prefer to keep hiding and waiting for the fateful day when it will happen, anyway?’

‘Get it over with. But what if.....?’

‘I’ve taken every precaution, Luce. Trust me. One more time.’ I said quietly.

She nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. ‘And will that be it? No more Bounty Hunters? Even though the bounty still hangs over our head?’

‘No. It won’t be over. We still have to get rid of that bounty. I’ve an idea about that, and I think I should just go ahead and act on it.’

‘Don’t you dare!’ Lucie’s eyes flared at me. Her voice deeper and strenuous now. ‘Tell me EVERYTHING. What idea?’

‘Now’s not the time. Let’s get this next stage over with and....’

My mobile beeped. I looked at the flashing images on the screen.

‘Well....time to get this show on the road.’ I stood up and Toni followed.

I placed a hand on her shoulder and said, ‘Whereas I appreciate your help. This is better handled alone. I know what I’m doing. I can’t be responsible for you too.’

‘What’s going on?’ Lucie said, her eyes wide.

‘Time for you to get your wish. The warehouse has been breached. It’s game on. I’ll be back later today.’

I relied on Toni to keep an eye on Lucie and keep her calm. If all went to plan I’d be back in a few hours. IF all went to plan.

I picked up my holdall in the hallway and slung it across my back. I needed to get out of the flat before Lucie threw a tantrum and wanted to come with me, stop me going, or even both. I closed the door and started to jog towards the warehouse.

Once out of sight I stopped and opened the bag. I began to sort out the equipment I needed and pulled on my light flak-jacket. The pockets filled

with various items I hoped I'd not need. I had one prime strategy and hoped it would go that way. If it didn't, I had a plan B and C. The last strategy was an exit one and I'd hate to have to admit defeat and use it. I wanted an end to this problem - today.

I went into my calm zone and walked the rest of the way to the warehouse.

I was aware of being followed for the last few days. They were good, but I knew there was someone there. I was surprised it took them so long to break into the warehouse. My concern now was if they were working together, whether the warehouse was a decoy and my flat the real target. But I'd left instructions with Toni about that.

I'd installed security measures that turned the flat into a fortress. The police could be called and arrive long before anyone could break in. As I left, I'd activated the alarms, and I was confident Toni had gone around and locked up as I'd shown her. I could now forget about their safety and concentrate on my own.

Was there one or two in there? I'd soon find out. But I wanted anyone inside to get nervous. So I decided to wait awhile.

I took my time on the journey to the warehouse. Partly because I needed to make sure I wasn't followed. And partly to keep my guest waiting. Time makes the nerves tense. It took several hours of waiting, feeding the ducks on the lake, a cup of coffee in a café before I made my way back towards the dead part of the city where I'd lived my professional life for so long.

Once outside the warehouse, I left my bag on the ground long enough to make a lot of noise opening the lock. With my bag in my left hand and my right hand in my jacket pocket, I entered the building.

It was quiet as usual, and a quick look around seemed to indicate nothing had been changed. I closed the door and walked forward. As I passed my van I saw the computer desk and noticed the chair was missing. Any second now..... I thought.

Then it hit me.

I felt the two projectiles hit my back and the sizzling sound of the electricity. It felt uncomfortable, but not incapacitating in any way. I jerked myself to the ground and made sure I was lying face up and towards where the Taser had been fired. I was so pleased the Hunter had used a Taser and not a more lethal weapon like a gun. That can really hurt, even with the flak-jacket.

I slowed the twitching and kept my eyes open and stared at one spot, as someone walked into my view. From the photos and description Orlando had

sent, I knew it was the one called, Nomos. Was Hawk with him? I waited to see.

He stood over me and stared down at his quarry. He was smiling as he said, 'So you're The Magician? Not much to look at, are you? You're not going to conjure your way out of this one.'

It was time to stop his gloating. I noticed he'd replaced the Taser with what looked like a canister of pepper spray. While he was talking he'd slowly lowered it, in over-confidence that his victim was helpless.

I brought my arm up. In my hand was a modified small airgun pistol that fired tranquilliser darts. Not the elephant ones, more primate tranquilisers. I've used it before to good effect. It takes just seconds to work. Closing my eyes and holding my breath, I fired it. If the pepper spray was used, I'd a good chance of reducing its worse effects. As I held my eyes shut I heard the sound of a body falling to the ground. I hadn't heard the hiss of the spray and so cautiously opened one eye. The air was fine.

I quickly got to my feet, my pistol in my other hand. I swept the warehouse looking for a target. It was empty. I moved around and did a thorough search. There are not many places to hide in there.

Once satisfied we were alone, I looked at the relaxed body of Nomos. 'You should know a Magician always has something up his sleeve.' I said. He looked peacefully asleep and would be for an hour, or so. I pulled out my mobile and dialled a number. Lucie picked up on the first ring.

'Hi honey', I said in our code.

'Oh, my God, are you all right, sweetie?'

'Fine. Everything okay there?'

I held my breath waiting for a coded message to say it wasn't.

'We're fine. What happened?'

'One down, one to go.'

'You got one!' more for the benefit of Toni listening. 'Is he....?'

'No. I want some answers. I may be a few hours here. I'll call when I'm on my way. Take it easy. Have a glass of wine. Give Toni a hug for me. Must go. Bye.' I hung up before more could be said.

I stood looking at Nomos, he was not a big man, the drug wouldn't take too long a hold on him. I pulled out the two prongs of the Taser from my back and slid off my T-shirt. Underneath I had a thin knife-proof vest, with a sheet of tin foil spread over it. The vest stopped the projectiles penetrating my flesh, and the tin foil shorted out the electrical charge.

I'd considered the trick with the gun I'd used on, Naomi. It might not work so easily on a trained professional. The fact he didn't have a gun made it all the easier for me. I felt the relief slowly disperse through my body along with the adrenaline.

Orlando's notes had suggested Nomos plan of apprehension would be non-lethal and most probably a Taser gun. I was thankful I heeded that piece of information, and particularly glad Nomos hadn't deviated from his usual modus operandi.

I dragged Nomos upright and sat him in the swivel chair. He was as any man is when completely limp, a deadweight. But I'm strong and eventually got him seated. I put plastic cuffs on his hands and feet. I went into my kitchen and made a cup of coffee and waited for Nomos to stir.

Searching him, I found a wallet with family photos, some credit cards and some cash, British Pounds and American Dollars. I looked at his phone and notice one missed text. I read it and thought about it. Someone called Brandon Forte. I'd look at that later.

I drank my coffee.

He eventually stirred and focused his eyes on me. I could see defiance and a little fear. He remained silent and so did I. I was quietly cleaning a handgun and could see he thought it was meant to frighten him. I saw him brace himself and summon up some bravado to face the consequences of his lack of professionalism.

I waited until he spoke. 'What happens now?'

I shrugged and said, 'Depends on you.'

'In what way?'

I stopped cleaning and appeared to be thinking of an answer. Quietly I said, "How many people have you put in this position?'

He didn't answer but was looking at the floor intently now.

'How do you like it now it's reversed, Justice Bringer? That's what Nomos means, doesn't it?'

He nodded. Suddenly the dramatic nick-name didn't seem so appropriate.

'I'm going to give you two options, which is more than you've given your victims. One, a quick clean death. Two, slow and painful. Which would you prefer?'

'Stupid question.'

‘Okay, as you assume I’m stupid, you’d prefer the slow and painful. Okay. Let’s see what we can do to accommodate you.’

‘No. Quick.’

‘Okay. I can do that too, but I need you to do something to earn it.’

‘What?’

‘Tell me who hired you?’

‘You know I can’t do that. *You* wouldn’t do that. You can’t expect me to....’

‘Don’t worry, I already know. Willoughby.’

He finally looked up at me. ‘I can’t tell you.’ I knew I was right. He had just told me with his eyes.

‘Okay. What do you know about your colleague, Hawk?’

‘I know of him.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen him for...nearly a year. Why?’

‘I understand the two of you are after me.’

‘I wouldn’t know. But if he’s after you, he *will* get you.’

‘I’m rather hoping he’ll try. If my source says he’s here, then he’s here.’

‘I just got offered this contract. Look....you don’t have to kill me. Why should I say anything....?’

‘Okay.’ I picked up the gun and gave it a final polish. ‘Anything else you want to say?’ I said calmly and quietly. He shook his head and looked at the floor again.

I moved over to him, keeping the gun in his view, but out of his reach. I cut the plastic cuffs to his feet, then moved behind the chair and freed his hands, standing well back after doing so.

‘Nothing to say?’ No response. I walked around to face him again. ‘No? Goodbye.’

As he was slumped in the chair, I had to bend my knees to drop the level of the raised gun. I fired into his heart and watched him jerk back violently just once. He slumped forward and slid off the chair. The blood pooled on my clean floor and I felt nothing. It was like the old days. If you felt nothing

for the target when they were alive, you need feel nothing for them when they were dead.

I played back the recording I'd made from the time I'd entered the warehouse. I listened to the tone of his voice, the intonation and any words that stood out as unique to his speech patterns. After a few minutes, I thought I could mimic the voice well enough over the phone.

I picked up his phone and sent a text to the mysterious Brandon Forte. It simply said, 'Call me'.

For the next part of my plan, I had to hope Hawk would get around to me sooner, rather than later. As I looked at poor 'ol Nomos, I hoped he wouldn't get too ripe, too soon.

I was trying to tidy up as much as I could when Nomos's phone rang. I tried to imitate his voice as I said, 'Yes?'

The voice at the other end was very cultured, and I didn't recognise it.

'Is that Nomos?'

'Yes.'

'Well....let me introduce myself. My name's Brandon Forte and I've taken over from Jacob Levy. Do you understand?'

'Yes. Why?'

'He has...left the company and I'm now taking over his duties. I just wanted to touch base with you to see how things were progressing.'

'Fine. I'm just about to capture, The Magician.'

'Really! Good work.'

'What do you want me to do with him? Alive I assume?'

'Yes, yes of course. What arrangements did Mr Levy have with you?'

I wasn't sure if this was a test. If Forte had just taken over it meant that Orlando Stone had delivered the recording to the police and Levy was ousted from his position as Defending Counsellor for Willoughby. I felt a small thrill from that thought. It was also clear that Nomos and Forte had not yet met.

I had to think quickly. I needed time to put the rest of the plan into operation and I didn't know how long I'd need.

'I can stash him somewhere and get back to you. Does that suit?'

'Most suitable. Let me know when that is all completed. Well done. Mr Willoughby will be delighted.'

I grunted and said, 'So you can take the bounty off now, right?'

'That will be Mr Willoughby's decision, not mine.'

'Any news from Hawk?' I asked in anticipation.

'Haven't been able to contact him as yet. I will try again.'

'Please do. I don't want that bastard on my tail after my quarry. Get on with it please. Give me his number and I will try from this end.' I could hear him hesitate. 'We're colleagues from way back. He always changes his phone on a new mission. So do I. We neither have each other's numbers right now.'

Still the silence. Then he made a decision and read out the number. I memorised it. 'Thanks. I'll call you later.'

Another number I'd memorised was Levy's mobile. I called him.

'Yes?' was his cautious approach.

'Mr Levy, Michigan here. Heard the news. Sorry about that.'

I was subject to a long tirade of abuse and foul language that I wouldn't expect from a legal representative who should normally be calm under pressure. The gist of it was he blamed Michigan for his demise as a lawyer.

Levy was livid at the recordings being given to the police. I tried to pacify him that I had nothing to do with it.

'But you hinted it could happen, in front of Willoughby.' His voice still high with anger.

I stayed calm and quiet as I said, 'I was just anticipating the worse scenario for you. And Willoughby. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I'm officially giving up on the Magician. Thought you should know. Didn't know it wouldn't matter to you anymore.'

For the first time, there was silence at the other end of the phone. Then..... 'Both Willoughby and I now believe that Michigan and The Magician are the same man. So you *must* be The Magician.'

I let the thought hang for a while before saying, 'Interesting speculation. Not a surprise, and one that's been muted before.'

'Are you?' his voice much quieter now.

'I think this situation is interesting because no one but me knows the truth and there's no proof to either confirm, nor deny the accusation. Very interesting conundrum.'

I could hear Levy's breathing get heavier as he said, 'The Jackal was always thought to be a myth, but they caught, tried and imprisoned him. Very little evidence was ever found on him. We will find you.'

'Are you saying I'm as famous as the Jackal now? I'm flattered, of course, but.....'

'I'm saying a little evidence goes a long way.'

'As I'm sure your recordings have proved that in a damning way for you. However, it's most unlikely that I'm the Magician, as I've just spent ten years hunting him. Unless I've a split personality and don't know anything about it. I'm off back to America, you have a good life. Do pro bono work, Levy, get yourself back into favour. You're too good a lawyer to not work. Not at the top level maybe, but you shouldn't starve either. But, concentrate on your honesty.'

There was silence at the other end. I couldn't guess what he was thinking.

'One question before I go. As a matter of interest only. How many Bounty Hunters were after the Magician? Just the four?'

'Yes.'

I tried a bluff, 'I suppose the two Americans were directly hired by Willoughby?'

'Why do you think that?' Levy said with hesitancy.

'Just a guess. As I said before, Willoughby is a leopard who can't change his spots. Have a good life, Jacob. Bye.'

I rang off, knowing that was the last we'd all hear from the fated Levy.

But would Forte be a problem I couldn't solve so easily?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HAWK

The call came while I was in my pool.

Harriet, my assistant, took the call and walked leisurely out to the deck and smiled at me. She waved the phone like a hello and stretched her arm out for me to come and get it.

It would only mean work.

I swam to the side, and she handed me the handset and walked away with the sexiest wiggle I have ever seen. And she knew it, the bitch. Always a tease.

I work through two main agents. They get me work; I pay them a commission. One agent is based in Germany, the other in Washington. This call was from Berlin.

Most of my work has come from this source for the last few years. This sounded intriguing, and I said yes. I agreed on an advance payment and told Karl to arrange a meeting, time and date.

Twenty-four hours later I was in the waiting room of a very ancient prison somewhere in London, England. I'd busted my ass getting there and then waited two hours to see my client.

The room was dull and uninspiring. Designed that way, no doubt. The single table was polished steel and I looked at my face in it. I was six foot six and stick thin. My hair has gone naturally white and is always like a stiff brush growing upwards. My long thin nose and small mouth give the impression of a bird, hence my nick-name of, "The Hawk".

I looked an oddity and have always looked distinctive. It's a great handicap in my business, tracking and finding people. They can see me coming and know when I've been. Consequently, I've developed a technique that reduces those disadvantages. I wait for someone else to catch the quarry and then steal it off them. I've become a specialist in remote tracking. I use all kinds of electronic surveillance to follow the people that are following my prey. Then, swoop, like a Hawk, and pick up the prize.

There's a lot of competition in my business, a lot of my kind of work is generated in the United States. An increasing amount now is going offshore. It's relatively simple to track and find someone within your own land, much more difficult if they move to another country. I've become very good at finding these people. Crooks, criminals and thieves that have evaded the crooks, criminals and thieves that are after them.

So here I sit, wasting my time waiting for the penal system to grant a basic human right to a prisoner, to have a visitor.

I've seen videos of Jamison Willoughby's TV appearances on YouTube, so I knew what he looked like. At least, I thought I did. This man was a poor imitation of the original. He looked ten years older and thirty pounds lighter.

His eyes bored into mine as he sat down without saying a word. The warder left, and Willoughby leaned forward.

'I need you to trace and capture a man I need to talk to, Tea Michigan. He will lead us onto the man I really need to talk to, a man known as The Magician. My lawyer, Levy will give you all the details.'

I nodded. To him, I probably looked like a bird pecking at seeds on the ground. 'I've heard of him. You'll want them both alive then?'

He nodded, his voice dropping to a whisper. 'A bonus if you can do this in a week. Can you do this?'

I smiled, not a good sight, 'If anyone can.'

'I like your confidence but be aware. Both these people are tricky customers.'

'Why not The Magician first?' I said, naturally.

'Because I already have someone making progress on that.'

I didn't like to hear this. I sat forward and said, 'Anyone I know?' He nodded. I didn't need to ask. So I said, 'Nomos.' He nodded again.

I sat back and rested my hands on the shiny surface of the table. I thought a moment and tried to weigh up my employer. He was in prison for charges he had little chance of proving his innocence. I'd done my research.

'How're you going to pay these bounties?' I said quietly, looking back into those intense eyes.

'I have aspecial reserve of funds. You'll be paid.'

'Even if Nomos gets to the Magician first?'

'If everything works out well and these two men bear witness in court, I can pay you both. No prejudice.'

I nodded. It was acceptable. 'You have information, details, people and places?'

He nodded. 'See, Levy.'

I had details of his lawyer Levy and was due to meet him in a couple of hours.

I had a sudden thought. ‘How far behind Nomos am I on this?’

‘Three days, no more. He’s close to finding the Magician.’

I nodded and absorbed that thought. I’d have to find Nomos quickly. I’d an idea how I might do that.

‘Anything else I can do for you, Mr Willoughby?’

‘Get me out of here. That’s all.’

‘That might be asking too much. But I can make a start with this Mr.....T Michigan. What kind of name is that for a man, anyway?’

‘Don’t underestimate him. No one knows more about The Magician than him.’

‘Okay. I’ll do what I can.’

‘Keep in touch with Levy, he’ll keep in touch with me. Good luck. Earn the bonus and my lifelong gratitude.’

He stood and walked away without a backward glance. His shoulders were now slightly hunched and his whole demeanour had changed from him talking to me, to him facing the prison guard. How much of this was an act? What good would it do him?

Levy was a little more forthcoming. He’d a presentation pack but with limited information. He admitted he’d given this to a few other Bounty Hunters. So far, none had been successful.

I took my time and read slowly through it. Levy began to fidget and wanted to get on with his business. I made him wait a little longer. I wanted him to be really anxious to get rid of me.

‘We can end this quite quickly, I think Mr Levy.’ I said snapping the folder shut.

‘Really? How?’

‘Two simple phone calls.’ I saw the look of puzzlement on his face, nothing could be this easy. ‘You call me when Nomos has found his man. And you call me when Michigan next comes to this office.’

‘I don’t know when Michigan is going to come to this office. He just...turns up these days.’

‘Then get your secretary to call me immediately when he does. Is there a hotel near here I can find comfortable?’ He nodded. ‘Then reserve a nice

suite for me for a week. We'll all be done by then. I'll let you get on with your business. Don't forget to call.'

I left him looking even more puzzled. I hate dealing with middlemen.

The hotel was...okay. Not to my personal standards. What's wrong with the Brits, this place didn't even have a pool! I ate in the hotel restaurant for lunch and found it was of a lower standard than some of the smaller restaurants I use in New York. And about twice the price.

During the next few days, I tried several more restaurants, gradually increasing in standard until I found one that nearly matched my needs. By then I was paying as much as a four-star restaurant in New York.

I had time to kill and so I did the usual American abroad sightseeing. I'd been to London five times before. On each occasion leaving the same day as arriving. Seeing just the airport, journey to the target and back again.

I fitted in some shopping in specialist shops. Putting together a small range of equipment I thought I might need. I wasted time and knew it, but I'd decided on my strategy and stuck to it.

Two days later it paid off.

A call from Levy made me pay attention. He was breathless, and his voice gave away he was a little angry at something, or someone.

He said he'd just arranged a meeting with Michigan. If I wanted to get eyes on my quarry, I would see him at Wandsworth Prison. I didn't want to go back to that place, but it was a start. I agreed. We discussed what was best to do, and he rang off. Still angry about something.

So a few hours later I was in the Prison Visitor's car park. I was an hour earlier than the proposed meeting of Levy and Michigan. I parked so I could see the entrance gate and sat in the car with my camera ready. Traffic flow was light, and I could see each vehicle as it entered the car park. I should see clearly the drivers and passengers.

I had a photo of the man I was looking for and he turned up half an hour later. I knew it was him. The description and photo looked the same. I watched him park his small VW polo and walk towards the main entrance. I watched as he entered the Prison and I called Levy. He was ten minutes out.

All I had to do was wait.

I saw Levy arrive and hurry towards the main gate. He disappeared. They would be several hours I was sure, if my experience was anything to go

by. I casually strolled around the car park as if I was waiting for somebody. Twice I passed the VW and casually slipped a tracker under the front wheel arch and then the rear.

I then drove out of the car park and found the nearest road in which I could park and wait. Finding a parking bay in London is next to impossible. I sat in the car expecting at any moment to be moved on by the police, or a warden. I guess I must have been lucky.

Nearly two hours later Levy called to say they were leaving. I watched my monitor and twenty minutes later I saw my two target dots begin to move. I smiled. It was this easy.

Why did Michigan take so long to get going? Who cares?

The man drove for nearly two hours, all over the place. He was certainly paranoid about being followed. We ended up in Richmond Park. The car park was large and now that he'd parked, I needed to be in the line of sight. That exposed me. As I said, I stand out in a crowd.

I sat in the car and decided to wait until Michigan moved again. He did, nearly an hour later. Off we went again for the scenic tour of the London suburbs. He finally stopped in a deserted area somewhere in Paddington. I waited fifteen minutes, and the signal hadn't moved. I found a side street to park, there was plenty of room as there was no one around. My solitary rental now stood out. I decided to park further away and walk in.

The road was a dead end, lined with derelict warehouses and old shops. All waiting for redevelopment. Builder's signs were already in place. What were they waiting for? End of a recession, financing, local government approval? Who knew?

My tracer pointed to one particular building, a large warehouse type of structure. That's where my man had gone to ground. I called Levy. I told him my progress, and he was silent.

'What was that address again?' I told him. I got it from my GPS phone app. 'And you were definitely following Tea Michigan, not The Magician?'

'Sure. Are you doubting me?'

'No. It's just that....that's the same address for both men. This seems to confirm what Nomos has said. It appears Michigan and The Magician are the same man.'

I was quick to pick up the implications. 'So Nomos and I are after the exact same man. Not two different ones?'

'Looks like it.'

'Where is Nomos now, do you know?'

'Somewhere nearby. He said he was in a hotel.'

'A hotel near here. I doubt it. Not Nomos. Okay. Leave it with me. I'll be in touch.'

I thumbed to end the call and sat tapping my teeth gently with the handset. What to do next?

It took a few minutes before I called Levy back.

'Ask Nomos where he's staying. But don't tell him I asked. Does he know I'm here?'

'No. you told me not to.'

'Good man. Let me know the hotel.'

Now we were getting somewhere.

I knew if I stayed around the warehouse long enough my quarry might spot me. What he would do, I couldn't guess. It might get violent, or he could go into hiding. I had to leave. But I wanted to do something first. Find a hiding place.

There were plenty of deserted buildings nearby, but I wanted somewhere I could observe the warehouse where my quarry was hiding.

With a slight push, one of the old doors opened inwards. Inside it was an open area, full of dust and debris of a dead business. It was some sort of factory floor. Benches and rotting equipment still bore testament to an old business that time had left behind.

The windows had long been vandalised and boarded up. But I found one that looked across to the warehouse and prised a small piece of wood away, so I had a clear view. This would do nicely.

Levy called. Nomos was staying in the Albany Hotel.

'Good. Now, what're his plans, do you know?'

'I'm waiting to visit Willoughby tomorrow morning. He'll give the go-ahead for Nomos to bring The Magician in. I hope that's not a conflict for you, Mr Hawk?'

'No. No conflict. Nomos and I have worked together before. Besides, Mr Willoughby has agreed to pay us both an equal bounty for both Michigan and The Magician. Now it looks like the same man, we need to renegotiate. Perhaps you might mention that when you see him. I do have, however, one favour to ask you.'

‘Go on.’

‘Nomos does not react fondly to my involvement in any of his....missions. Perhaps don’t tell him that I’m around. Also....let *me* know, before you tell him what Willoughby wants him to do. That way, I can stay out of his way. I’ll remain in the background to help if he needs me. Is that all okay with you?’

‘That’s fine.’

‘Nothing’s going to happen until tomorrow, so I’ll go back to my nice hotel and get a good night’s sleep. Just remember to call me before Nomos. There may even be a bonus in this for you, Mr Levy.’

‘That’s a nice thought. Pleasant dreams.’

The call was ended.

I did sleep well.

The next morning, after a more substantial breakfast from the buffet, I went back to the warehouse, via an Outdoor shop.

Inside the old factory, I now had an air bed, blankets and warm clothing. Food and water. Even a small primus stove to heat up some soup if necessary. I thought I wouldn’t need to be there that long, but you never know.

I’d thought through my strategy and knew it was open to flaws and changes of direction. I didn’t know what to expect but expected the unexpected.

As I saw it, Nomos would enter the warehouse at some stage and emerge with a captive. At that point, I’d take my time and relieve Nomos of the captive. Immobilise Nomos for a few hours and get the captive to Levy and claim the whole of the bounty.

Done it before, would do it again.

It’s my preferred method of operation. I can use a gun and am a passable sniper too. But it’s all so...barbaric and noisy. Too much evidence left for the police. I prefer up close and personal. An injection deep into the victim’s throat does the job for me. It’s even hard for the autopsy to find the mark.

I make up the solutions myself. A little bit of chemistry knowledge can work wonders. Transporting them is a synch. I get them through customs disguised in male grooming products. Shampoo, aftershave, toothpaste.

They're undetectable on their own and can be mixed with fragrances and are harmless until mixed together.

My mind was wandering.

In the corner of the window, I'd placed a small motion detector, aimed at the front of the warehouse. This allowed me to relax on the air bed and rest. Any movement outside set off a soft alarm on my mobile phone.

It was mid-morning and in my half-asleep state; the alarm buzzed in my earpiece.

Through the torn flap of wood covering the window, I saw my old friend, Nomos. He was entering the small door on the right. I saw him enter and close the door behind him. I waited.

The bastard Levy hadn't told me Nomos was coming. I specifically asked him to let me know.

Time passed by.

Sometime during the mid-afternoon, my phone buzzed in my pocket and I answered.

'Is that Hawk?'

'Who is this?'

'I need to converse with, Mr Hawk. Are you, he?'

'Who are you?'

'I represent Mr Willoughby. Are you, Mr Hawk?'

I was thinking quickly. I was watching the front of the warehouse and trying to understand who I was talking too.

'You represent Mr Willoughby, in what way?'

'Are you, Mr Hawk? I need to have a confidential conversation with, Mr Hawk.'

'Okay. Let's say I'm Mr Hawk. What do you want?'

'Then let's say I can only speak to, Mr Hawk. Can you confirm your identity, please?'

'Jesus Christ! What do you want?'

There was a pause before he said, 'I'm Brandon Forte. I am replacing Jacob Levy.' He left a pause before saying, 'Now are you, Mr Hawk?'

'Sure. Levy. He's gone? Where?'

'I'm not sure. I just wish to touch base with you, sir, maintaining a dialogue so I can report back to Mr Willoughby the ongoing situation. Can you give me an update on that?'

I was still thinking. I needed time. 'Sure. I'm in sight of my target and expect to close sometime today. Will that do?'

'Certainly. Just to confirm one thing, who is your target?'

'Michigan.' I said now slightly puzzled again.

'Thank you, Mr Hawk. I will be in touch. Let me know of any developments.'

The phone was silent again, just like the outside of the warehouse.

Levy replaced by an upper-class dick called, Forte. Whatever next? These Brits.....!

Time passed by.

It was late afternoon when my sensors purred at me.

My eye was to the hole, and I saw someone opening the left-hand small door. It was Michigan. No....not Michigan, someone I hadn't seen before. Younger and slimmer than Michigan. Shorter too. Who was this guy? I took photos. The man entered, the door closed, and silence descended again.

I waited.

Time passed by.

My sensors sounded again.

I looked through the gap and saw the left-hand door open. It was a while before someone came out. The same man who had entered, poked his head around the door and looked all around. He stood outside with the door shielding him. He looked around again and went back in.

What had happened to Nomos? Was there a trap inside? Have I underestimated my quarry?

I was not going to approach a situation I was unsure of. I decided to wait.

It was sometime later that my phone rang. It was a number withheld.

'Hawk? That you?'

I recognised Nomos's voice. 'Nomos? Where are you?'

'In some warehouse in Paddington. Look...I need your help. I've captured the man I'm after, someone called The Magician, but need help transporting him.'

'How did you get my number?' I was confused and a little angry.

'Forte. He told me we were both after the same man. I understand you've found your man too. I'm guessing we're both at the same location. Are you at a warehouse?'

I didn't want to answer. I wasn't going to share anything with Nomos. We have a history, going way back.

'Why do you need my help?'

'I can't move the fucker. I've been ...hurt. The bastard got me, I can hardly walk. Can you help or not? I'll split the reward with you. Come on...time's a-wastin''

'I just saw someone come out of the warehouse. Who was that?'

'The Magician. I managed to get him after he came back in. Tough son of a bitch. Are you coming, or not?'

I was thinking hard. Nomos sounded stressed, his voice different. He was obviously hurt and wouldn't be a problem for me. It would be easy to take the quarry off him. But what would I do with Nomos? Could I leave him to suffer there? Sure. But should I? Probably not. I could take the mark, get the reward and come back for Nomos later. Or send someone else to help him. The prick Forte, perhaps.

That was the best plan.

'Okay. Give me a few minutes.'

'Thanks.' The line went dead.

It looked like Nomos had faltered. It was up to me now to show these Brits how the good 'ol USA does things right.

I made a final check that all my equipment was in my pockets and I'd everything to hand. I opened my broken door and watched the warehouse carefully. No movement, no cameras, no security to be seen. I hurried across the dusty street and stood by the left-hand door the Magician had appeared at.

I tried the handle, and it opened easily and silently. I eased the door open and looked inside. Straight ahead of me I could see a body on the ground and someone kneeling beside it. I stepped cautiously in, holding the Taser straight out in front of me. These things are not very accurate, so you need to be near your target to be sure. I crept forwards.

The light was not good, but I could see the kneeling man wasn't Nomos. He looked a little like him, but I knew it wasn't and got quietly nearer. He must have heard me because he turned and stared at me. His eyes fixed on the painful Taser and I could see it was the man that had made the earlier appearance.

I had The Magician in my sights.

I didn't say a thing. My heart was hammering. One million bucks, right there. Nomos had said the man was tricky and I could now see the dead body was that of Nomos himself. I held the Taser steady and motioned it upwards to get the man to stand. He slowly rose, and I waved him away from the body. He walked carefully away and stood beside a long bench, his hands held high.

'Who the hell are you?' the man said.

'Your worst nightmare, Mister. Who are you?'

'Sorry aboutyour friend there. He is your friend, right?'

I nodded. 'Was. Why did you kill him?'

'He was going to kill me.'

'He wanted you alive. And so do I.'

A light seemed to go on in his mind as he said, 'Ahhhh. The other Bounty Hunter. You must be....Hawk. Am I right?'

I nodded. I glanced around the warehouse. It was comprehensive. I saw a few cars, vans and motorbikes in there. Some sort of gym, a sleeping area. Some boarded off room that could be a bathroom. It reminded me I needed one soon. I just needed to bind this guy up quick and get him back to Forte.

'I am the Hawk, yes.'

'Heard a lot about you. Your friend here was very talkative until he slipped and shot himself.'

'Nomos wouldn't do that. He doesn't carry a gun. *You* must have shot him. That makes me mad.'

He shrugged. He seemed at ease. His arms stayed above his head and he leaned against the workbench watching me.

'All's fair in love and war. And this isn't love, is it?'

He was irritating me. I needed to cuff him and get to the bathroom.

'I suppose Levy knows you're here?' He said.

I nodded. 'Except, Levy's history. New guy on the block, Forte or something. I'll be handing you over to him.'

'Does he know you're coming?'

He was full of questions. No harm in being equally annoying back. 'It'll be a nice surprise for him and Willoughby.'

'Make sure Willoughby pays you. He's no assets you know, no money or influence any more. Dead man walking, so to speak. Are you going to give a share of the bounty to his widow?' He slowly lowered both hands and pointed to the body on the floor. Nomos's blood had stopped leaking, and a skin was slowly forming on top of the pool. It looked almost black in this light.

Keeping my Taser on him, I moved closer. 'Turn around and put your hands behind your back.'

I held the Taser while I pulled out the cuffs from my pocket.

I don't know what happened. There was a bright flash of light and suddenly I was convulsed in agony.

I must have passed out before I hit the floor.

PART FOUR – TERMINAL STRATEGY

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JAGGER

Orlando had sent me a fair amount of info on the two Bounty Hunters. Little was useful except perhaps the one outstanding fact about Hawk. He was a coward at heart.

Hawk was a vital part of my plan. My Terminal Strategy. I needed everything to be in place to allow me to finally put this debacle behind me and get on with my life. I needed to kill off The Magician, Michigan and anyone else that stood in the way.

I needed Hawk unharmed in this warehouse. I needed to question him about exactly who knew what was going on? Then I could move forward. But the scaredy-cat bastard wasn't coming after me.

I knew he was there. I could see him. I looked through my Infra-red goggles and watched him sitting across the street. What was he waiting for? He must have seen Nomos come in, but not out. That had frightened him. I needed to bring him in.

But how?

I poked my head around the door and looked outside. Would that tempt him? Knowing his quarry was still to be had? A surprise visit for the target by an unknown assailant?

Still, he hesitated.

Everyone who has known Hawk says he's a coward, standing off, letting others take the risk and stealing their efforts at the end. Not a man to point a gun and pull the trigger. More come up behind and shoot in the back.

It was time I offered my back.

Forte had reluctantly given me Hawk's mobile number. Time to give him a kick up the butt. I dialled it and waited for the answer tone.

In my best imitation of Nomos's voice I said slightly panicky, 'Hawk? That you?'

It took a little persuading to convince Hawk that the danger was over for him and that I was incapacitated as well. What self-respecting coward would pass up that opportunity? Hawk couldn't.

'Okay. Give me a few minutes.' He said with a note of excitement in his voice.

I watched through the goggles as he got himself ready. He moved slowly towards the warehouse, I got into position. Hawk was unaware that the Hunter had suddenly become the Hunted. I wanted him to think he'd the upper hand. I needed to know who knew what, about the two Hunters. He might not tell me at the end of my gun but might talk if I was at the end of his.

I'd put the knife vest back on, assuming the Taser would be Hawk's weapon of choice. Orlando's information suggested it would be.

I adopted a casual and resigned approach to the fact that I'd been caught out by the clever tactics of the wonderful Hawk. His ego and imagination did the rest.

I worked on his vague friendship with the deceased Nomos. Hawk was forthcoming with his plans with Forte and it seemed that Forte didn't know what was happening at this end of the mission. I was sure now that I could go ahead with my plan. All I had to do was disarm Hawk and get the job done.

'Turn around and put your hands behind your back.' He said with a confident tone to his voice.

I did as he asked and made sure my feet were in the middle of the rubber mat I'd laid by the workbench. A little distraction for the victim....I flipped out a hand flare. An old magician's trick. Simple in concept, some gunpowder and paper, with an ignition set off by friction. You can throw fire at people. The flare is big and bright and lasts less than a second. I've seen people use this trick with business cards. You present your business card and it burst into flames. They never forget you.

In Hawk's case, the flare made him step back and raise his hands to protect his face from the flame thrown at him. The Taser was no longer on me, so I slapped my hand down on the switch that ran a low voltage current through the metal mesh on the floor.

Hawk was hit by the electricity, but my rubber mat protected me. I was lucky he wasn't wearing rubber-soled shoes. But Orlando's report said the Hawk favoured English Brogues, made of leather. The first thing I noticed when he entered.

As soon as he hit the ground I turned off the current and disarmed the Bounty Hunter.

The effects of the shock were short lived. Hawk was soon glaring at me with hate in his eyes. 'Is that how you tricked, Nomos?'

I shook my head. 'No. You were easier.'

Anger changed to fear as he realised Nomos's fate would soon be his.

I made him the same offer as I did Nomos. 'I'm going to give you two options, which is more than you've given your victims. One, a quick clean death. Two, slow and painful. Which would you prefer?'

He shook his head, hardly able to speak.

'Okay, I'm going to assume it's the quick option. But first, you've got to do something for me.'

Hawk found himself in the position that his quarries over the years had found themselves in. With a determined and competent person after them, with a clear intent to kill.

Being the coward he was reported to be, Hawk soon fell into line. I saw tears in his eyes and he repeated my pre-written lines. It sounded at times a little too desperate, but it would have to do.

'So.....are you really, The Magician?' Hawk had to repeat several times before it sounded like a genuine question.

'I know you're The Magician. You can't deny it any longer.' Came out more convincing.

The rest took a long time. He was getting more distressed as the dialogue continued. We were both thankful when it had finished.

I felt I'd tormented him enough and picked up one of my least favourite guns. The look in his eyes said it all. There were tears there now. Any second he would start pleading for his life. I didn't want to hear it.

One shot between the eyes. He fell forward already dead. I let out a long sigh and brought my mind quickly back to the matter in hand.

Deception, the magician's main tool. Time to get to work. I concentrated on editing the tape first. I'd written the script, so it didn't take long. Both my voice and Hawk's voice were recorded in about the same position, so ambient noises would be the same. I spoke the words in between the lines I'd made Hawk say. I included gunshots and cries of pain.

The digital editing leaves no giveaway clicks when cutting and inserting. It took an hour that's all. I left the recording device on the bench where it would be found later by the police.

Then I started on Nomos. I put my Michigan's false gold tooth in his mouth, in the same position as I wore it. I put the gun I'd shot Hawk in his hands, so his prints were all over it.

I opened one of the car's bonnets and removed the oil filler cap. I dribbled motor oil from a can over the engine and across the floor. Finally

dribbled it all over Nomos body. Especially his face and hands. Then I set it alight. While it caught, I put the gun I shot Nomos with into Hawk's hand.

I've always worn my special rubber gloves when in the warehouse, so my fingerprints and DNA will not be found by the police. Only the body of Nomos would be severely damaged, and the gold tooth would indicate he was Michigan, who was also now believed to be The Magician.

The edited recorded conversation would be the final proof that Hawk and The Magician had a showdown, and both died. The police would have enough proof from Forte and Levy that Michigan and The Magician were believed to be the same man. Despite any counterclaims by Willoughby.

The fire wouldn't destroy everything in the warehouse, the oil would burn locally and not too far. The concrete floor would prevent the fire from spreading. It would look like The Magician was doing car maintenance and was surprised by Hawk. Hawk was shot by the Magician and before he died, Hawk set fire to him.

I made a final check at everything was in place and said a final farewell to my workshop. Before I left the warehouse, I set the machine to record. It would record only silence until there was no memory left on the drive and it would cut off.

Without a backward glance, I silently left.

I called Lucie and heard her sharp intake of breath, waiting for distressing news.

'It's over, sweetie.' I said with a smile in my voice. 'Be home soon.' I rang off before the emotion would get the better of both of us.

I made one more call from Nomos's mobile.

Forte picked up on the second ring.

I imitated Nomos again and added an edge to my voice.

'The Magician's nearly killed me. Hawk is on his tail. I've had enough, the bastard is TOO dangerous. I'm off back home. Forget the expenses and bounty. I'll keep what I have.'

'Calm down, Mr Nomos. What is it your saying?' Forte was trying to instil calm.

'I'm out of here. I've booked a plane back home. I'm done. Let Hawk have him, they're both in the warehouse now. You have the address. Thought you should know. Look I can't.....' I rang off.

Using Nomos was a gamble, he would never reach home. Perhaps the Magician got to him first? If they checked his dental records with those of

The Magicianperhaps the whole thing would fail. Either way. There was no more trail for the police to follow. Willoughby couldn't maintain the Bounty illusion anymore, he would have to drop it.

I felt drained by the events of the day. I ran everything through my mind again before I finally walked away. Had I missed anything? I thought not. It would have to do. It was the best I could do. Now I had another task.

How to tell Lucie I'd done everything and if it didn't work - there was little left I could do.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LUCIE

When the mobile beeped at Jagger my heart almost stopped.

I should be used to these calls to danger by now, but I'm not. When will it end!

I put on a brave face as Jagger hurried away to face unimaginable danger. As far as I knew that would be the last I saw of him. Yet he went with a smile full of confidence.

I felt Toni's arms around my shoulder and I knew it was all right to let go some tears. It's just that I couldn't stop once started. I was a mess. I just couldn't cope. Once again the thought crossed my mind that this was the time to walk away for good. Can I do that? I can do that more easily than stay to be put through this agony time after time. I'd done it once and look where that had got me?

But the pain did subside, an hour or two later. Toni seemed to think hot tea was the answer. But we both knew it wasn't.

'What am I going to do?' I asked Toni.

'What can you do? Wait.'

'What does your boyfriend think when you go out after your.....targets? Does he worry about you?'

'He doesn't know or care about what I do. Out of sight, out of mind.'

'Poor you.'

'*Lucky* me. I like it that way. Gives me freedom and independence. He's there when I need a man, not when I don't. You should try it.'

'I did. For twenty years. I won't go back.'

'Yeah, so you did. But....I didn't mean it in that way....'

'Don't worry, I know what you mean.'

Toni leaned closer and held my hand. 'You have to accept that Jagger is...that kind of man. Physical and active. A predator. Hunter.'

'Killer.' I added softly.

'That too. But only when needed. He doesn't take life lightly, or randomly. He has killed, but does that make him a killer?'

‘In the eyes of the law, it does.’

‘And in your eyes?’

I found myself shaking my head. ‘He’s my husband, the man I stupidly fell in love with. I know he won’t change, I just want.... the circumstances to change. That’s all.’

‘They will if he has anything to do with it. He’ll sort it out. He’s doing all this for you. You both, actually. He wants a good stable life. He’s ready to end his ...past activities.’

‘I know. He was going to retire when all of this happened. It’s all happened BECAUSE he wanted to stop doing those....awful things.’

‘You need to be there for him. He’s having a tough time of it. Ignore the smiles, he’s hurting. While he’s out there, he’s worried about you in here.’

‘I’m grateful for you being here, Toni. I know he thinks the same. He sees you...as my bodyguard when he’s not here.’

‘Hardly. I’m not in his line of work at all. I run from guns and conflict. Hardly a bodyguard.’

‘But you’d defend me if you had to, wouldn’t you?’

She smiled. She looked so much cuter when she smiled. ‘Of course, I would. But that doesn’t make me a bodyguard.’

There was a moment of silence and reflection. I looked at the clock. He’d been gone nearly two hours. How much longer?

‘What will you do when all this is...over?’ I asked, as a diversion for my thought patterns.

She shrugged. ‘I really don’t know. I might go back to doing what I did earlier for the Border Agency. But after all this real excitement that’d be so boring.’ She laughed. I found myself smiling too. ‘That’s better.’ She said. ‘See the funny side of it. When it is all over just think of the kind of life you could lead.’

I nodded, thinking of what I wanted from my new life. Not much, it was true. Peace and tranquillity were high on the list. The two things denied us at the moment.

‘I was wondering about becoming a Private Investigator. What do you think?’ Toni stared hard at me. I was about to laugh when I realised she was serious. She wanted a straight answer, this was not something she’d thought up on the spur of the moment.

'I don't know. I don't know anything about....private investigation. You're good at finding people, isn't that a part of it?'

She was nodding. 'Big part of it.'

'Is it dangerous?'

'I suppose it might be. Depending on what cases I took on and where they led me.'

'You need to talk to Jagger about it, he'd know. He'd help in any way he could, I'm sure.'

'Okay. When he comes back.'

'If.' I said suddenly saddened again.

'When!' she said with a sharp slap on the back of my hand. 'How about a gin and tonic?'

I nodded, not caring. If she needed a drink, she should have one. I looked at the clock again.

It was about three gins later that the mobile rang. My heart skipped, and I grabbed it, looking at the screen and realising it was from Jagger.

He said, 'Hi, honey,'

I knew I should stick to our code, but all I said was, 'Oh, my God, are you all right, sweetie?'

'Fine. Everything okay there?'

'We're fine. What happened?'

'One down, one to go.'

'You got one!' What did that really mean? 'Is he....?' I couldn't say the word dead.

'No. I want some answers. I may be a few hours here. I'll call when I'm on my way. Take it easy. Have a glass of wine. Give Toni a hug for me. Must go. Bye.'

The bastard hung up!

'What did he say?' Toni's eyes were bright for news.

'He's got one of them and wants me to have some wine.'

It seemed forever before I heard the key in the front door. I held my breath, expecting to see my blood-soaked husband fall into my arms and tell me he loved me before the last breath left his bullet-ridden body.

The bastard was smiling!

After all these reunions in our life, my intended response was always over-ridden by my normal reaction. I threw myself into his arms and kissed him until it hurt us both.

'You could've called.' I said quietly into his ear.

'And miss this reception?' he said through my multiple kisses.

Toni moved forward and gently tapped his shoulder and walked away again. She was glad to see him home but couldn't show her appreciation in the same way as I did.

She sat in an armchair and waited until I'd finished strangling him and trying to smother him. 'How'd it go?' she said after a few moments.

I pulled away for him to answer. My eyes boring into his, looking for truth, or lies. 'It's done. They won't bother us anymore.'

Toni's eyes dropped to the floor, and I thought I heard a deep sigh escape.

'Really?' I said, searching for the real answer in his eyes.

'The official Bounty Hunters are all gone. We just need Willoughby to drop the bounty offer and we're home and dry.'

I hugged him again, hurting myself this time.

'Is he going to do that?' the ever-practical Toni asked quietly.

'Big question. He told me he never would, no matter what.'

'So what next?' Toni was looking at him. I pulled away to see the answer in his eyes again.

Jagger sat on the double sofa and pulled me down next to him. I could see he didn't want to share any details, but he knew we wanted to know what was happening.

'In a few days, or maybe sooner, there'll be an announcement by the police. Or, maybe, from Willoughby's lawyer. They'll announce that The Magician is dead.'

My heart pounded, what did he mean! 'What do you mean?' I had to say out loud.

He sighed and tried to formulate the words, so we'd get the right message without too many details.

'They think a man called Tea Michigan to be the real Magician. He is now....dead. Killed by one of the Bounty Hunters sent to find and capture him.'

'Who is this...Tea Michigan?' I asked.

Jagger looked quickly at Toni before saying. 'He was me. I used the persona to get access to Willoughby and to Levy. Willoughby and Levy now believe him to be the *real* Magician.'

'Because you tricked them into believing it?' Toni's question had a double edge. She was sure Jagger was the Magician and needed confirmation from his own mouth.

'Circumstances convinced them.'

'So if this...Michigan is dead.....who?'

'Who is really dead?' Jagger finished for her. She nodded. 'One of the Bounty Hunters.'

'You killed them both.' Toni said quietly, without inflection, or criticism meant.

'Did you?' I asked when he didn't answer.

'They were apparently enemies of each other, overly competitive when after the same quarries. Their deaths were convenient, and I put their demise to work in my favour.'

'Are you hurt?' I asked, looking him up and down again.

He shook his head. 'Just tired. Perhaps a good night's sleep.'

I hugged him gently and felt my tears coming again. I didn't want him to see how worried I really was. Too late for that after the greeting, he got on his homecoming. I must have acted like a military bride greeting her husband after a year's tour in Afghanistan.

Toni said, 'And if Willoughby doesn't lift the bounty, even after the target has been lost?'

Jagger shrugged.

'The old Magician would know what to do.' said Toni with a meaningful look at Jagger.

'Maybe. But as I've said many times before – I'm not The Magician. The Magician as perceived by others would have gone around and killed everybody and walked away. I'm just not that way inclined. I'm left with just two options. Neither, I want to take.'

‘What are they?’ I had to know. I just knew they’d both be dangerous and frightening. I looked at his eyes again. The lies would come now.

He sighed and rested his head back on the sofa. ‘If they believe the death of The Magician, then Willoughby’s bounty will be meaningless. No one will follow it up, certainly not the professionals. Like you, Toni.’

She nodded. ‘And if they don’t believe it?’

I saw Jagger look at me and I felt a chill run right through me.

‘I’ve an idea that should work. One more effort to get the bounty lifted.’

‘Do I want to hear it?’ I said pulling away from him.

Jagger took a deep breath and said, ‘The Magician gives himself over to the police and has a full checkable background. He admits to several assassinations and names the people who he’s worked for in the past. All now dead so they won’t be compromised. He refuses defence counsel and wants a rapid trial, which he’ll plead guilty to, on all charges in a closed court. He disassociates himself from any defence of Willoughby and reinforces Willoughby’s full guilt. He’s found guilty and sentenced to a long term in prison.’

I was struggling to understand what Jagger was saying. HE was The Magician. Who was going to the police for trial and imprisonment?

Jagger was in full flow. ‘As soon as it’s publicly announced that there’s no longer any bounty on The Magician, news breaks that the charged man is not the person he said he was. He’s an escaped inmate from a lunatic asylum and is *pretending* to be The Magician.’

I did not believe I was hearing this.

Jagger continued, ‘This proves to be true, and he has to be released from prison and transferred to an institute.’

‘What!’ was all I could say.

‘The Magician can’t necessarily escape from a jail, but he *can* from an institution.’

‘Are you serious?’ I said very loudly.

Toni said, ‘And you think this will work, Jagger?’ her voice as incredulous as I thought mine sounded. ‘An escaped mental patient? Really?’

Jagger looked at ease now he’d told us his plan.

'If it's planned carefully enough. DNA and fingerprints can be faked to match an errant mental patient. In the same mix up it's discovered that the patient is not mentally ill, anyway. But now he has faked a crime, he needs to be assessed. I could pass that test.'

Toni was shaking her head. 'Too risky. Too many variables. It could take forever. You couldn't manage this alone. You couldn't manage this with expert help. It's crazy.'

'You're crazy.' I added unnecessarily.

'It's the best option.'

He sat back and just looked at us. Was he expecting histrionics from me and a lecture from Toni? I looked at Toni and she looked at me. She laughed.

'It's a joke, Lucie. Breaking the tension, right?'

Jagger shook his head. 'I've thought it through. I've a few wrinkles to sort out. But it should work.'

'If it doesn't?' I said. 'You remain in prison. What good will that do any of us?'

'You said two options. What's the other?' Toni was leaning forward now.

'You don't want to know.'

I looked at Toni for support as I said, 'We must know. Whatever it is.'

He shrugged again and looked at Toni, 'Have you had a chance to talk to your boyfriend about the prison details I wanted?'

Toni hesitated. She went to her bag, pulled out an envelope and handed it to Jagger. 'He wanted to know why you needed that stuff. He said it was difficult, and he only did it because I insisted. No sex for a month, I said. You don't know how powerful that is on Ryan.'

I was getting a feeling about all this. I watched Jagger carefully as he read the few sheets of paper that Toni had given him. I saw the beginnings of a smile and then I began to relax.

'I get it.' I said.

Jagger looked at me and said, 'Get what?'

I pointed to the papers and said, 'This....this is the plan you really want to follow. But you knew I'd object...whatever it is.' I waved a hand at Toni, 'We'd object. So you come up with a totally impossible scheme, so it made this one look reasonable. Right? I'm right. Right?'

His poker face was hard to read. But right now, whatever those papers said and whatever he was planning had to be better than him going to prison.

I stood over him and pointed a finger dramatically at his papers and said, 'This....this, is your Terminal Strategy, isn't it?'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BRANDON FORTE

Willoughby was in shock.

I'd shown him copies of all the police reports. Autopsy, Crime Site, reports from officers and specialists alike. All read the same way. But Willoughby didn't want to believe it.

'He's faked it. Somehow the Magician has faked his own death. I know it. I know him. Now go out there and prove how he did it and find where he's hiding now.'

I had to be careful what I said. I needed to keep him sweet and on my side. On the other hand, I really wanted to ditch this pig of a case. I was treading a fine line here and I could fall either way.

'The police are convinced, sir. All evidence points to the man called Michigan was shot and burnt. Probably accidental.....'

'Accidental? Yet his fingerprints were destroyed?'

I sighed and tried to stay calm. 'It's true his arms were one of the parts of his body totally destroyed, along with his head. There was a gold tooth in there too. You must recall if Michigan had a gold tooth? You met him on several occasions.'

'Yes. Yes, he had a gold tooth. But was it the same gold tooth? I've met the Magician too, remember?'

'Did they look alike, sir?' He was silent. 'It's my understanding that they looked very similar. Michigan wore a disguise, and something called a fat suit. Without all that, they could be the same man. Several people who have met both have agreed.'

'What people?'

'I believe you were witness to the Magician being in the home of, Mr Charles Ryce-Hardin. You were there, sir? Correct?' He nodded. 'Mr Ryce-Hardin did confirm that he believed the two men. For he's met Michigan too I believe, the two men could be the same person.'

Willoughby was shaking his head. 'That old befuddled fool. He'd believe anything. I'm a testament to that. Keep him out of it.'

'I will try, sir. I'm sorry to say this, but the police believe this is now a case closed on the double homicide.'

'Ridiculous.'

'I know this sounds quite insensitive. But this is the transcript of a digital recording found at the site.'

He needed to understand that this particular piece of evidence the police had faith in. It was surely the death blow to his defence.

'As you know, the police are quite hot on recordings if they contain material that *can* be used in court. This recording they've accepted as genuine. Found at the scene of the homicides. You might like to read it....?'

He looked at me. 'What does it say?'

'Well, sir. It's the conversation between The Magician and the Bounty Hunter, Hawk, whom you *personally* hired to catch him. They ended up killing each other, but there was a dialogue before they did that. It appears The Magician had used your ploy of recording conversations. Sorry, if that seems insensitive. But the police are putting great store on this particular piece of evidence.'

'Do you have a copy of the actual recording?' His eyes glinted at me.

I nodded and opened my case. I pulled out my small laptop and started it up. I found the file and pressed play. Willoughby sat back with his eyes closed and listened. There was no emotion on his face all the way through the recording.

'So.....are you really The Magician?'

I leant forward and whispered, 'That's Hawk's voice. I can vouch for that.'

'What do you think?'

I whispered again, 'That's Michigan's voice.'

'I know you're The Magician. You can't deny it any longer.'

I spoke quietly again, 'Do you recognise that voice too? You met him in here.' There was no acknowledgement.

'Okay. I've finally run out of time. How did you find me?'

I asked again, 'Do you recognise that voice as Michigan's?'

Still no response from Willoughby. His eyes were closed, and he was listening. Listening to his case fly out the window.

'You got careless. After ten years of success, you just got careless.'

'Happens to us all.'

'You should've retired earlier.'

‘What happens now? Are you going to kill me?’

I pressed the pause button and said, ‘We believe that the Hawk must have had the upper-hand on the Magician. Don’t you agree, sir?’

He didn’t move, so I pressed play again.

Hawk spoke, ‘No. Unless you try something stupid. You’re wanted alive. You’re going to be tried for crimes that Jamison Willoughby has been charged with.’

‘Have you any proof?’

‘We’re gathering that right now. You’ve had a long career, with many assassinations. Proof won’t be hard to find.’

‘This wasn’t the end I’d imagined.’

‘But it’s the end you get.’

‘I don’t want it to be this way.’

‘Stay where you are. Stop!’

I pressed pause again to say, ‘This is obviously where the Magician decides to make his escape.’

Willoughby sat with his eyes closed saying nothing. I pressed play.

‘Is this the end you imagined?’

‘Put that down.’

‘Put yours down.’

‘I WILL pull this trigger.’

‘So will I.’

There was a pause in the soundtrack. Still no response from Willoughby.

‘Now what, Bounty Hunter? You going to kill me and risk the bounty being cancelled?’

‘I’ll still be paid. I found you and delivered you.’

‘You haven’t delivered me yet. The bounty’s fake, anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s a subterfuge to distract attention away from Willoughby’s crimes.’ I saw Willoughby twitch at that.

‘So be it. Are you ready to die?’

‘Are you?’

‘Last chance, put it down.’

‘Say your prayers.’

‘Not if.....’

There were two almost simultaneous muffled shots. All noise ceased, apart from some ambient sound in the background.

Willoughby opened his eyes and looked at me. ‘And the police believed all that shit?’ I nodded. ‘Fake, like the rest of it.’

I shrugged and thought what to say. ‘The forensic people have confirmed the recording is from the warehouse. They believe it’s genuine. And it now provides a problem in maintaining the bounty for information on an already dead man.’

‘The bounty stays.’

‘I’m not sure how legal that.....’

‘The bounty stays, if you want to remain my Counsellor.’

He looked at me with those flinty eyes and his face was set in stone.

‘As you wish, sir.’ I backed down. I pushed all the papers together to put them in my case.

Willoughby slapped his hand down on them hard. ‘Leave those. I wish to study them properly.’

He stood and stared at me as he swept the papers into his arms. He turned to go. ‘We can still win this case, Forte. Just think of your future when people realise *you* were the one to win it for me?’

‘I will do my best, sir.’

‘Your best may not be enough. Levy had the right Idea. Fight fire with fire. Fight dirty. Get creative, Forte. I’m sure you have it in you. You’d better.’

He left me alone to ponder my position. For once in my career, I knew I would not get my own way with a case. I knew deep down I couldn’t run this defence in the way the client wanted me to. I was deeply saddened to realise I might have to back out of this one. I didn’t want that to be my decision, so I’d leave it to others.

I sat awaiting the arrival of the unfashionably late Sir Neal in his oak-walled office. It was all so drab and old-fashioned. Who did this intimidate, or impress anymore? No one. I needed a drink, and it was still before noon. If he offered, I would accept.

He came in without warning and silently sat at his desk. I was sitting opposite and nodded a greeting to him. This was normal for him, he thought he was the strong silent type. Gain respect by being mysterious and authoritative.

Bullshit.

The man was a prize jerk and everyone in the office knew it. But he'd influential connections and our client base was dependent on them. I suppose that shows that our highly valued clients are a bunch of crooks, if they need high-powered lawyers like us. Just a thought.

'I've read your report, Forte. Doesn't make good reading, huh?'

I shook my head. I'd agonised on how to present the facts about the case. I didn't want to appear defeatist but didn't want to give the impression we could expect success either.

'I'm sure I don't need to remind you that within this organisation, we respect our clients. We do what they ask from us. Always. You've been here long enough to know and understand that.'

Nodding, 'I do, sir. This is, as I'm sure you know, a very....unusual case. Nothing like this has ever been handled by your company before. I'm of the opinion we need to consider carefully all its ramifications, before we agree on tactics on how we're to proceed.'

Neal was nodding. I took heart. 'Mr Willoughby's strongest defence tactics was the arrest and conviction of the man called The Magician. This had now been removed from the equation. I cannot see anything to replace it. Nor is there anything that we can latch on to, to strengthen our case.' More nodding. 'So, sir...any advice you can offer will be appreciated.'

Neal was thinking. I hoped about what I'd said and written, you never knew with him. He slowly stood up and paced around his desk. As he moved towards the door, I thought he might not have heard my request for guidance.

He opened the door and turned to me. 'Just do your best, Forte. That's what we all expect from you.'

He was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PRISONER 681325 – Tooms, Danny

I didn't know who the fuck this guy was. I don't get visitors and when I do, at least I know who the fuck they are.

I was sitting in the reception room. Well...they call it a room, more like a large empty cell to me. There was a row of us inmates all facing the same way across the small tables. One warden in the room to ensure no touching or inappropriate behaviour.

My visitor was the last to be let in. Strange looking man. He'd long straggly unwashed hair, misty looking eyes and a little overweight. When he spoke it was quiet with a soft Scottish accent. I looked at him, slouched back in my chair. Let him know he was a stranger and a potential enemy until he proved otherwise.

His eyes were cloudy, but they held my stare in a steady and unflinching way. They were almost hypnotic in their intensity. He gave me the fucking chills.

'Danny Tooms?'

I nodded. 'Only my friends call me Danny. Everyone else it's, Daniel.'

'I hope you come to regard me as your friend, Danny.'

'We'll see. What do you want? I'm busy.'

'So I see. I will get to the point. Your wife, Leila is about due, I understand?'

Anger rose in me. Nothing unusual in that. But when a total stranger comes in here and starts talking about my pregnant wife, I can only think the worse. He must have seen my body stiffen, ready for a fight. He placed his hands out in a calming gesture and looked quickly at the Screw leaning against the wall.

'I spoke with her yesterday. She asked me to send you a message.'

I leant forward, even more, distrustful now. My wife and I have a code, we all do in here. You can't have a normal conversation in prisons. You have to get a true message across by using phrases, or words, that mean something else. If my wife had sent this bozo with a message, I would know straight away if it was genuine.

'Well?' I said with a touch of venom, which I'm famous for in here.

‘She said, her exact words, “Arthur sends his love”. Does that make sense to you?’

I felt a chill ripple through me. Arthur meant my father, whom I trusted all my life. He died a broken man the day I went into prison for the first time. He forgave me on his deathbed, no one else knew about that. Leila mentioning his name meant I could trust this messenger. I felt the familiar stinging behind my eyes. Just the thought of her speaking with someone that was right here with me....hurt. In a good way.

Nodding, I was trying to hold back the tears. ‘Did she say anything else?’

He waited until he thought I’d control back before saying. ‘She misses you. Little Ray and DD are doing fine and miss you terribly.’

He stopped and just watched me. I fought for control and won. The mention of my kids was quite normal. ‘What do you want with me?’ I managed.

‘I’ve put a large amount of money at your wife’s disposal. Hidden from the Revenue and authorities. Cash. As and when she needs it for the new born. It was a favour. Now you can do me a favour.’

‘Who do I have to stab?’

He smiled. Not a nice smile. More twisted like a sneer. ‘No one. You’re to be just a messenger, really. More....a courier. Can you accept that?’

Of course, I could. After all these years in and out of stir, I knew my way around. I’ve been a fixer and procurer many times. I’ve even done some bodyguard work too. A courier...piece of piss.

‘Details?’ I was leaning forward now.

His voice never altered, his stare still direct. A packet of cigarettes appeared in his hand as if by magic and he slid them across the table towards me. I didn’t touch them. I waited. It was just seconds before the screw was beside my table. He snatched the packet and opened it. The warder pulled all the cigarettes out and pushed them all back in. He kept one and put it behind his ear, his payment for checking for contraband.

I grinned at him and picked up the packet. They disappeared into my pocket almost as fast as they’d appeared.

‘Is that it?’ I asked incredulously.

He nodded. ‘For part one. You’re to give those to an inmate on your block. Jamison Willoughby. Know him?’

I was back in my cautious role again. ‘Yeah. I know of him. Not to speak to, exactly. But I can give these to him. Why?’

'I understand he's started to smoke?'

'Everyone does in here. It's the boredom. I asked you, why?'

'Soon, you'll be given a small phial....'

'A what?'

'Phial. Small glass bottle. Tiny. You can hide it....anywhere.'

I nodded like I knew all along. 'Sure. File.'

'As soon as possible you're to get Willoughby to drink the liquid in it. Put it in his tea, anything. Force it down his throat if no one can see you. But he must drink it *within two hours* of him smoking *any* of those cigarettes.' His stare seemed to intensify even more. I nodded. 'It's vital you do that. Or the cash disappears from Leila and the kids. Am I making this crystal?'

I felt very uncomfortable all of a sudden. This was more than just doing courier work. This had a deeper feeling of something more sinister. I found myself shaking my head. 'I don't know. If I'm caught.....'

'If you're caught, the substance will be found to be just a stimulant. The cigarettes are...just cigarettes. There's no danger of you being punished for any of this. You have my word on this.'

'Fuck your word, mate. I don't know you from, Adam.'

He seemed to be thinking. He leant back against the chair, still his eyes on me.

'Your wife said this was how you'd react. If you did, I was to tell you.....Little Ray wants an I-phone.'

The words got me again. Little Ray, my youngest son. Didn't need an I-phone, he was retarded. Horrible word that, something else, but not retarded. He needed medical help.

The stranger continued. 'I've paid for a private consultant to look at him in two weeks' time.' I felt another shock run through my system. 'If all goes well, Leila and Ray can keep that appointment. If not.....'

'I'll do it!' I said without thinking. 'But if all this is bullshit....I've people on the outside that'll fuck you up.....'

'You have the offer. I've relayed your wife's opinion of it to you. Now...it's up to you.'

He stood and started move away.

'This....' I dropped my voice, 'File? When and how will I get it?'

He walked back and leant on the table, his voice just above a whisper. ‘A warder will pass it to you. It appears there are several warders here who like to earn a little extra from the outside. Take action soon as you can. Remember the two-hour rule.’

I held up my hand for him to wait. I looked quickly at the screw with the cigarette still behind his ear. ‘What about this Willoughby? I know what he’s in for, but what’s it to do with you?’

‘You don’t need to know. Nothing will come back on you. Let’s hope the test on little Ray turns out to be something to be thankful for.’

He turned and left. Leaving me deep in thought.

Over the next few days those dark demands deepened my spirits further. I began to have second thoughts. Leila was due a visit and I couldn’t wait for her to confirm what the odd stranger had said. In the meantime I hung on to those cigarettes. I knew something was in them, so didn’t smoke any. The screw who took one was still around a few days later. I’d assumed he’d smoked it, or maybe sold it on. I was getting more and more nervous.

Leila arrived, and she could see immediately how uptight I was. She looked great. She was putting on weight with the kiddy and she looked good for it. I don’t think I’ve seen her so relaxed for years.

We went through the usual opening lines and she told me all her news about our kids and her very odd family in Edgware. Then she looked hard at me and said, ‘I had a visitor. Did you?’

I nodded.

‘He was very....generous. Did you realise how generous he was?’ I nodded again. ‘I hope you were grateful?’

‘I’m going to be.’ I said with tears stinging my eyes.

A day later one of the screws poked his head around my cell door. I was alone, but he knew that. He rested his hand on the end of my bed and nodded to me. He left. I looked at the bed to see a small glass bottle. A pound coin would cover it. The glass was shaped into a thin pointed top. I assume this was broken off, and the liquid poured out. It seemed simple. But did that mean it wasn’t deadly?

I was having doubts again now, then I thought of Leila and the kids. I had to do it. Whatever happened from now on, they needed my protection. The stranger had offered a lifeline for them, I couldn’t let them down.

I walked along the corridor to the cell in which Willoughby had to himself. I looked in and all around the corridor. It was quiet, as quiet as it ever gets. Voices carry in these vaulted buildings, echo off walls. People shout for no reason, or good reason sometimes. It's never really quiet, even at night.

'Hi.' I said and stepped in. I could see distrust on his face as he looked up from the book he was reading. A cup of tea was by his hand and it was nearly full.

'Heard about your trial setback. You have my sympathy. I had that trouble too.'

He just looked at me.

I pulled out the cigarettes and took one out. I offered it to him and he just looked at it.

'It doesn't compensate for the setback. But...well....you now know you have one person in here with *some* sympathy for you. As I said, I've been there. Best of luck.'

I kept the cigarette outstretched. He finally leaned forward to take it and I bent forwards to help him. With my hand behind my back and a smooth action, I snapped the top off the file and tipped the fluid into his tea. I've been a pickpocket for twenty years, if I couldn't pull off this simple fucking slight of hand, I might as well retire.

He nodded his thanks.

'Cheers.' I said, looking at his cup on the desk.

He nodded again and picked it up.

'I'll see if I can get something stronger next time.' I said pointing at the cup. 'But for now, tea will have to do. Cheers.'

My heart was pounding, and I hoped my face didn't show my excitement and tension. Slowly he raised his cup to his lips. I restrained from saying cheers again.

He took a sip.

Then another.

I held a box of matches and struck one. I took a cigarette from the packet lit it and drew in the smoke deeply. It was a risk, but I had to trust the stranger. I held the match to Willoughby who just looked at it. Slowly he raised the cigarette to his lips and allowed me to light it for him.

'Cheers.' I said again. I couldn't help it.

We smoked for a few minutes and I decided my tasks were fulfilled. Time to withdraw. I smiled and turned to leave.

‘Tell me about your trial setback.’ He said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BRANDON FORTE

The news broke like a hurricane in the law practice.

Our most high-profile case ever - in ruins.

Our client dead.

Sir Neal was furious and tried to blame me. I stood in his office and let him rant on for a long while. Two other Senior Counsellors were there, and I waited for them to interrupt Neal and come to my aid.

Neal burnt himself out at last and was going to do his usual trick of walking out and letting everyone else pick up the pieces. But for once I'd had enough. Enough of being treated like a minion. Enough of being thought of as a whipping boy. Enough of this crass old man's bad behaviour.

I said, 'Of course, sir, this really is your fault. Not mine.'

That stopped him in his tracks. He was lost for words where a minute ago he had far too many to choose from.

'I came to you for advice, just a few days ago. I wanted guidance on this case. What was your advice? Do you remember?' He was still blustering, not used to anyone questioning his authority. 'I'll tell you, word for word, sir. Just do your best, Forte. That's what we all expect from you. Remember, sir?'

We all could see he did remember. The puzzled look on his face was because it'd been brought to light by an underling daring to question his actions.

'Your total appreciation of this case was to fire the *one man* that used the tactics *you* approved. Replace him with someone who was unfamiliar with the case. And now the client has died, from nobody's fault, you can only think to blame the last person involved in the case. How is that justice, sir? From a man that works in the field of justice. Earns his reputation in dispensing justice. I think I deserve an apology from you, sir.'

I could hear the sharp intake of breath from those around me. I didn't know if they agreed with me, or not. But I did know they'd tolerated this old fool's bullying for many years longer than me. Right then, my position in the company was not important to me. My reputation was. I was not going to be blamed for something I didn't do, nor bullied into suffering the consequences.

'You're fired, Mr Forte. With immediate effect.' He turned to go.

‘Then I’m afraid I will have to make a confession to the Law Council with regard to your law firm Jerome, Jerome and Maury, sir. And it’s mishandling of the Jamison Willoughby case.’

Neal stopped. More puzzlement crossing his face. ‘How dare.....’

‘Not dare, sir. My *duty*. I was going to broach this subject with you during our conversation a few days ago. But you were only interested in the client dictating how we perceive the law. But as a company, we’ve grossly miss-managed this whole case.’

‘What’re you rambling on about, Forte?’

‘We’re not diligent in our search for facts and the truth, Sir Neal. No one offered to assist me in the finer details of this case. I understand from my colleagues you were approached to supply more staff, but you refused. Is that so?’

‘Of course, I did. You should be able to manage this on your own. Damn it, man, you’re supposed to be a capable lawyer.’

‘So short staffed, my small team let slip some vital points of evidence, that could have won the case for us.’

There was now a silence. Neal came back into his inner sanctum, carefully closing the door as he did so. He looked around the room, memorising all the senior staff for later analysis of this developing situation. ‘Explain.’

‘We’ve been duped. Willoughby said all along his case would be won if we found The Magician and proved he was *totally* responsible for the crimes he was accused of. Well, it looked like he was right. We found The Magician. We *can* get evidence to prove he was responsible for *some* of the crimes levelled at Willoughby. If we could prove that, all other accusations could be tainted. We may have won a mistrial.’

‘So? The Magician is dead. End of a line of enquiry.’ Neal still looked puzzled.

‘The Magician is *not* dead.’

Neal was almost spluttering. ‘The police have proved otherwise. The Police told me they’re glad to see the back of that case. Don’t rock the boat on that! Are you so stupid you can’t see this simple fact, Forte?’

‘No, sir. I’m not the one being stupid. The Magician fooled us all. I believe the dead men were Bounty Hunters hired by Willoughby.’

‘What proof do you have?’

‘Right now, none. Tomorrow I could have DNA and dental records of Nomos to check against the deceased. If that proves to be correct, The Magician is still out there.’

‘This is meaningless. The case is closed. Does the phrase can of worms mean anything to you, Forte?’

‘It does, sir. If I’m fired, my duty is to report my findings to the Law Association. And ask for an investigation to this company’s method of operations. The practices of Jacob Levy are already under review from evidence of malpractice. But, particularly to the ethic stringently enforced by its owner. You, sir. Whatever the outcome, no one of class, or note, will be clients of your firm again.’

‘Are you trying to blackmail me, Forte?’ He was getting angry now.

‘Not blackmail, sir. Just trying to bring you into the real world, to realise the position you’re putting yourself into. Only we in this room know the Willoughby case *should* go further. If it does, and we lose, this company of lawyers may well have a permanently damaged reputation. If, however, I’m fired, it is my duty to reveal all.’

Neal was not as old and doddering as he would have his employees believe. ‘Clear the room. Except you, Forte.’

The others shuffled out, with looks at me as if warning to be circumspect. That was okay for them, but it wasn’t their job and reputation on the line here.

Neal sat at his desk and looked at me. ‘Fire you and the resultant investigation would be damaging to us all. Not fire you and we can let the Willoughby debacle disappear into history. Have I got that right?’

‘Absolutely correct, sir. It’s a regrettable situation.’

‘And you still think I could’ve done something to prevent all this?’

His eyes were now steely and fixed on me. ‘I think we both know the answer to that. Sir.’

He nodded and had come to a conclusion. ‘So....you expect me to keep you on. And, I suppose, a promotion and pay increase. All that for your silence?’

I shook my head. ‘No, sir. In all consciousness, I could not work for a firm with the ethics you’ve demonstrated to me. I do have to leave. But it would be very beneficial to me if I had a glowing endorsement from one of the most respected senior legal heroes of our age.’

He thought about it for a while and laughed. ‘Damn it, Forte. You could’ve made a great lawyer here.’

PART FIVE – EPILOGUE
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
LUCIE

The news came as a shock to us all.

Then I realised that perhaps not quite a shock to Jagger.

‘Was this *your* doing?’ I said pointing at the news on the TV.

Willoughby’s picture filled the screen. Jagger looked at me as if I was mad. ‘Me? How could I have possibly got into prison and....anything? No...it says he died of natural causes. His heart gave out, which surprises me. I never thought he had one.’

‘But he’s dead. That’s the main thing.’

‘I suppose it is.’ I walked over to him and kissed him on the top of the head. ‘Does this mean....it’s all over?’

He pulled me onto his lap and pointed to the screen. Willoughby’s lawyer Forte was talking, we turned the sound up and listened.

I felt the tension build up inside of me as he explained how distressed he was at the loss of his innocent client. But because of his demise, they’d now lifted the official bounty from the man known as, The Magician. It has been documented that the Magician was also deceased. This event had brought to an end the whole series of disasters that have plagued the Jamison Willoughby case for some time.

‘*Now* it’s all over.’ Jagger said and kissed me tenderly.

We heard a noise and Toni entered the room. She let go of her suitcase and looked at the TV. It had moved on to another story, the world keeps turning despite what goes on.

‘Do we believe everything the lawyer says?’ Toni said with a serious face.

‘Why shouldn’t we?’ Jagger said squeezing me tighter.

‘So, The Magician is dead? Sure?’

‘The Magician is dead. The police have said so.’ I said, looking at her, expecting her to smile as if it were a joke.

‘You never told us what happened in that warehouse, Jagger.’ She said staring at him

‘You don’t need to know.’ He said lightly.

She was not to be swayed, 'There were four people involved. Two Hunters, the Magician. And you? Where did the other one go?'

He gave me a quick squeeze and said, 'The other Hunter must have gone home. That's what the police report says, anyhow. I came home.' Another squeeze.

'So you did. And glad we are too.'

'Are you leaving?' I asked.

'No reason to stay anymore. Lucie's official bodyguard is home. Even he will be out of work now. I need....to get on with my life.'

I got off Jagger's lap and went to hug her.

'You're always welcome at the farm, Toni. Please visit us.' I said feeling the tears start already.

She hugged me and said, 'I won't be far away.'

I said, 'We're going back to the farm tomorrow. Stay with us for another few days?'

She shook her head. 'The farm has rather mixed memories for me, I'm afraid.'

'What are you going to do?' Jagger said getting out of the chair and crossing to Toni.

'I'm still toying with the idea of getting into the Private Investigating business. It'll need a steep learning curve, but I'm willing to give it a go.'

Jagger hugged her as he said, 'I know someone who can help you. Guy named, Orlando Stone. A good man. Just started his own business. The two of you would be great together.'

'Okay. Text his contact details and I'll get in touch when I'm ready.' Jagger let her go and stepped back.

'I'm sure you'll be brilliant at it, sweetie.' I said to Toni, hugging her again. 'Give my love to Ryan for me.'

Toni shook her head and said, 'I'm not so sure he'll be around much longer.'

'Why?' I said, surprised. 'I thought he and you were....?'

She shrugged. 'Once. Perhaps. A lot more casual now. That's the way it's going to be. Trouble is....the bastard's useful at times.'

I grabbed hold of Jagger's arm and grinned when I said, 'I know what you mean.'

Toni was serious again, and she hugged me silently and then Jagger. She picked up her case and headed for the door, saying, 'Give my regards to Sharen. Take care. Both of you.'

And she was gone.

It took a few weeks to re-adjust to the farm life again, only this time it was much better. No skulking in the shadows, no disguising ourselves to go shopping. Everything was open and above board. We ordered new kitchen appliances and furniture. All delivered in proper delivery vans and with strong men to put them in the right places and get them working.

During all this time I watched Jagger carefully. If I thought my life had changed dramatically, his changes had to be even more extreme. When would the novelty wear off for both of us? I was also aware that Jagger wouldn't want to be without a major project. Once the home is finished, what would that be? I still wasn't convinced he was cut out to be a farmer, 360 days a year. I couldn't see that. Besides, I didn't want that for us either.

We had Sharen stay a few days with us. That was nice. She was so grateful for our help and she certainly convinced us her dark days were behind her. I don't know how he did it, but Jagger got her a job in Bristol. He thought it far enough from London to get her away from the temptation of her past. Large enough city so she wouldn't feel out of place, not so big a city so she could revert to her old lifestyle. Jagger promised her that Nasty Rico could never trouble her again. I hoped he'd made good on that promise, this time.

When she left, I was sad for a few days, my past was intertwined with hers. Jagger knew how I felt. He'd saved me and helped to save her too.

That was the past.

What the future holds – who the fuck knows?

THE END

www.maxdrayton.co.uk