Chapter 1

Each of the men had received the same call at some time during the previous week. They’d been given an address and a time, nothing more and nothing less. Now they had gathered as instructed, inside a small terraced house in London, none of them knew any of the others and they sat in silence, waiting for the man who had called them all together. None of them had met any of the others and there were only a few nervous attempts at conversation before the room fell silent and remained that way.

They weren’t kept waiting long, less than fifteen minutes after the last man had arrived, the sound of the front door could be heard. This was followed by a series of slow, measured, heavy footsteps in the hallway. The tension in the room rose noticeably with every step, as the sense of mystery surrounding the meeting grew.

The wooden door to the dining room then swung open and the man who’d brought everyone in the room together strode in. The new arrival was dark skinned and well built with an immense aura of power palpable to the men sat around the table. For a moment they were all transfixed, wondering who he was, his name was a mystery as was the reason for his summons. In fact the only reason they had come at all was because the underground grapevine, which they were all connected to, had said it was a bad idea to try and ignore the man. Even then though there were no details about him, just a shadowy reputation and a warning.

His name was Nathaniel Adir and he’d been born in Palestine over three decades ago. But his parents were killed by a retaliatory Israeli airstrike when he was only a couple of years old. He had been found crying in the ruins of his former home and had been entered into the adoption system. He’d been found there by a Jewish couple who had adopted him, two more Israeli settlers arriving from Tel Aviv in search of a new life.

For sixteen years Nathaniel had lived in relative comfort, the happy child of two loving and hard working parents. He was never told about his true past or parentage though, his parents reasoning that he was their son now and what had been before didn’t matter. Despite his adoptive parents’ best efforts however, half remembered images from his former life haunted him and he never felt like he belonged. There was always something that felt alien about his situation and when he was eighteen he found out exactly what had always been wrong.

It had started out as a normal day and Nathaniel had been walking in town when he met a man on the street. As soon as he saw Nathaniel, recognition had gleamed in the man’s eyes and he’d instantly accosted the young man, dragging him to one side. At that moment Nathaniel had been gripped by terror as his abductor began to rant at him, half sentences that didn’t make sense interspersed with random curses. After several minutes of confusion however, the truth came out and Nathaniel was introduced to his uncle. It took a few more minutes to fully take in what he was being told and a few more to believe it but eventually he’d learned the whole story.

Upon hearing the truth, he had become incensed and had stormed home to confront his adopted parents with the truth. They’d professed to love him but his rage was uncontrollable and he’d continued screaming at them both. At some point in the confrontation Nathaniel’s rage had boiled over, the red mist had descended and he’d lost control entirely. When he regained his senses and saw the ravaged bodies lying on the floor, the knife in his hands and blood everywhere, he’d fled. Taking to the streets he’d eventually found his uncle, waiting on the street for him, as if he’d known exactly what was going to happen. After he’d explained the whole story to a man he barely knew, Nathaniel had been helped out of the city and introduced to the glorious cause.

Initially Nathaniel had been just another foot soldier, another radical willing to make headlines in the West by blowing himself up. Instead of being called upon to do so however, he ended up being moved up the chain of command, thanks in part to his Uncle’s influence. At nineteen, less than a year after committing double murder, he was helping to organise high profile attacks around the world. He helped recruit, train and plant volunteers anywhere and everywhere, and then giving them their orders when it was time to act.

The strange thing was he felt no emotion when doing any of this. The men he was in contact with were effectively being sent to their deaths, but he felt nothing towards them. As for the people his men attacked, Nathaniel only felt a deep satisfaction at every death. An eye for an eye. It was something he’d been taught when he studied the bible. It was now the philosophy he lived his life by. The West had launched the first attack, now it was time for them to suffer his retribution.

In the following years he’d enjoyed a long and successful career in international terrorism. He’d set up his own organisation and began perpetrating attacks in every corner of the world, the more unexpected and deadly the better. For Nathaniel there was nothing more satisfying than hearing an explosion and the resulting screams of men, women and children, in the knowledge he was taking his revenge.

Yet, despite his numerous successful and high profile attacks, he’d never been identified by the various investigators who were searching for him. This in itself gave him a sense of satisfaction. Nathaniel knew he was cleverer than the men supposed to be stopping him, and it was always a wonderful thing to be able to act without ever being looked for. It simply gave him more opportunities to prove he was that much smarter than everyone else.

As time went on however, he began to tire of planning small scale attacks, he wanted to do something more. He’d begun planning something that would bring Israel and the West that supported it to their knees, but to do that he needed money. So while his men preparing in camps spread throughout the Arabic world, Nathaniel Adir was here in London to organise the funds that he needed, and cause some devastation while he was at it.

With the company assembled, Adir, sitting at the head of the table, got up and addressed the others. As he did so he looked around the table, assessing the men he had called before him. A couple were criminals that didn’t share his beliefs, most were jihadists he’d never met and yet claimed to be devoted to his cause. Between the two he wasn’t sure which was worse, the criminals who didn’t believe but could get him the supplies he needed, or the young idealists who were young enough to be his sons. Nathaniel wasn’t sure whether he could trust any of them; but sometimes beggars couldn’t be choosers and these were the only men he had, so he’d have to make do.

“Welcome gentlemen. I know you are all wondering exactly why I have called such a varied group of people here today. The answer to that is simple, revenge. More specifically revenge on the West with an action so dramatic that it will never be forgotten.” At these words murmurs, could be heard from around the table as the group digested the information they’d been given and tried to work out what this action would be. Before anyone could think of it for themselves though, Nathaniel told them. “The fact is I need money for my plan so when I give the word you will attack the London Stock Exchange. You will be given what you need and you will be told what to do, but all I need to know now is whether you are with me?”

At this Nathaniel looked at each face seated round the table and in the deafening silence, he was pleased to see he had everyone’s attention and participation in the scheme. That was fortunate for them as he didn’t like loose ends and if any had refused to join him they wouldn’t have lasted to the end of the day. Satisfied that everyone was with him, Nathaniel began to outline his plan in detail, to the astonishment of his audience at its audacity.

Having told them everything they needed to know, Nathaniel left them there, sat around the table in silence as they struggled to comprehend the full extent of the plan. Meanwhile he walked straight back out the front door and straight up to the car he’d left idling just next to the kerb. Inside one of his most loyal men sat waiting for his leader to return.

Opening the front passenger door, he got in and said, “Amateurs the lot of them. None of them are trained or committed like the kind of people we usually work with.”

Nodding sympathetically, while wary of his leader’s temper, the other man, Youssef, said “God gives us the tools we need for the job.”

Nathaniel looked sharply at Youssef as he said this, retorting almost instantly “On this occasion I seriously doubt those tools will suffice.”

“Then don’t use them,” Youssef said, “get rid of them and bring some in from the training camps.”

“That’ll take too long,” Nathaniel exclaimed, his temper rising and noticeably colouring his voice, and his cheeks, with emotion. “This has to be done soon, MI5 is sure to be on the case already, and the time it would take to get those men over here is far too long.”

Youssef knew he was now treading on dangerous ground. He was the closest thing Nathaniel had to a friend, but he also knew that the other man would have no problems killing him at the drop of a hat. The man was utterly ruthless and cared nothing for human life. Still he couldn’t help saying, “So we use the amateurs then.”

At even that hint of defiance from his lieutenant, Nathaniel turned in his seat and angrily said, “Do not test me today Youssef, if my plan is to succeed then so must this attack on the Stock Exchange. In fact it is critical and with those amateurs, all that’s likely to be achieved is a dozen corpses and not much else. I want you to watch them Youssef, I have told them to stay at that house and not to leave. Watch them carefully and report back to me on their progress. I want to know what’s happening at all times. Understand?”

Merely nodding in answer, Youssef kept his eyes ahead, not trusting Nathaniel’s temper in the confined spaces of the car. Fortunately their journey was nearly over and he pulled the car up in front of a warehouse. Getting out he said nothing to Youssef and merely slammed the door, allowing the car to continue along the road while he entered the warehouse. Things inside were dark until he turned the light on to reveal a very spartan interior that was to be his base of operations.

For the moment however his main interest was in a small area in the corner of the room which was partitioned off by a set of curtains like those found in hospitals. Stepping past the curtain’s, Nathaniel looked at the very different scene that greeted him. Every surface was coated with blood and in the centre of it all was a chair. The chair was occupied for the moment by a bloodstained, hunched up person, barely alive and barely conscious.

Smiling grimly, Nathaniel’s sadism shone through in its rawest possible form for a moment as he looked with pride at his handiwork. The man was an agent for British Intelligence investigating a group only loosely connected to Nathaniel’s, but that had been enough to earn this treatment in his eyes. The first few hours had been in the pursuit of information; the last eight purely for Nathaniel’s own pleasure. Now however the man had outlived his usefulness, even as a plaything and it was time to end it.

Standing in front of the man handcuffed in the chair, Nathaniel reached into his jacket and extracted a pistol from an inside pocket. It was a Beretta 92 he’d acquired from an underworld contact upon arriving in London. Checking the action, he made sure that there was a glint of brass from a chambered round before releasing the slide.

Raising the pistol, he centred the muzzle on the man’s head and as he did so Nathaniel felt a rush of excitement course through him whenever he killed for the cause. It was a primal feeling that always made it difficult to breath. Seemingly realising what was happening; the man in the chair looked up and stared at Nathaniel with barely focused eyes. That made him pause for a moment in surprise before the smile returned and then he pulled the trigger with no further hesitation.

The man’s head rocked back violently, blood splattering the wall behind him. Untroubled by the sight, Nathaniel remained stock still, seemingly uncaring as he stared at the body in front of him. Then slowly, with his ears still ringing from the shock, he walked away and immediately stripped down out of his now bloody clothes and got into a rudimentary shower in another corner of the warehouse. Busying himself washing away the dead man’s blood, Nathaniel never heard Youssef return or remove the corpse from the corner of the warehouse. He only realised his companion had returned when he got out of the shower to find a set of clean clothes waiting for him on a chair next to the shower.

Once he was dressed, Nathaniel walked into the main section of the warehouse and saw Youssef sitting in a chair, waiting for him. Nodding to the other man, Nathaniel said, “you cleaned up then?” to which he was treated to a curt nod. “Good, then we can move on with the plan. Are you ready to do what is necessary?”

“Always,” Youssef immediately answered with a slight smile on his face.

“Good, then I will tell you what I intend to do with the proceeds from the Stock Exchange attack.” As Nathaniel did so, Youssef was left astonished by the sheer ambition of the plan. It seemed impossible to complete and yet could be so outlandish and crazy that it might be just about possible.

Chapter 2

The slight vibration in his pocket and the barely audible buzzing sound that accompanied it was the last thing David Ryder wanted ten minutes before the end of his first lecture on a Monday morning. It almost certainly heralded another tiresome and difficult job, potentially weeks on end away from university and questions to be answered when he came back, not to mention the mortal peril. If that wasn’t enough it was only the first week of March, he had another three weeks before the end of term. So he chose to ignore his phone instead and raised his head back to face to the front of the lecture room, trying to concentrate on what the lecturer was saying.

Despite his best efforts though, his mind couldn’t entirely block out that slight vibration against his thigh and he ran his hands through his dark brown hair as he considered what it might be this time. The last message had taken him to Colombia, where he’d spent days traipsing through the jungle, being chased by an armed gang. By comparison this could only be an improvement, or so he hoped.

Eventually he had to give in. These weren’t people he could ignore forever and it wasn’t wise to try either, especially considering the mess he’d left them with after Columbia. From what he’d heard the Americans had been very unhappy with the results of that mission. He looked at his iPhone to see the predictable words; “Pick up in fifteen minutes.” Nothing more and nothing less, just the same message as always, details would likely come much later.

Five minutes later and the lecturer concluded the hour, allowing him to exit the stuffy lecture hall and head back to his student accommodation, where he was sure a car would already be waiting. As he walked, David put his earphones in, realising that this might be the last chance for relaxation before he was put into another life and death situation.

If he’d hurried he could have made the rendezvous on time, but because he didn’t care enough to rush he adopted a more casual pace and opted for the longer walk along the river path. The fallout from this was that he was nearly ten minutes late by the time he arrived at the bridge and began to walk up the hill to his accommodation. Unsurprisingly there was a dark saloon car already parked in front of the door, a black suited man holding one of the back doors open. Knowing this was an invitation for him; David didn’t bother saying anything and just got in.

As he stepped inside the car’s black leather interior he caught the smell of the leather as well, suggesting the car was either relatively new or rarely used. Then he looked across the spacious back seat and saw a face smiling genially at him. “Well, Mr. Ryder, how are you getting on?” the clipped Oxford tones fell upon his ears with an unwelcome familiarity.

David didn’t recognise the man, but the voice was familiar. It was the classic blend of upper class and patronising that he’d encountered ever since his employment had begun. Meanwhile the suit that’d held the door open got in and the driver started the saloon up and began to drive along the cobbles of the city. Watching the familiar sights of his home pass the window in silence, David wondered what could possibly need his attention this time.

Before he’d been called on to tackle criminal gangs, terrorist cells and foreign regimes. He’d faced down every kind of opponent imaginable and he was still standing, despite only being eighteen years old. He’d utilised the skills taught him by his father and honed by his experiences around the world. His young age also provided him an innate advantage, as his enemies continually underestimated him.

But what made him so dangerous was his ability to distance himself from all emotion in the moment. When it was required, he was utterly ruthless, capable of killing anyone at the drop of a hat without conscience. The guilt did often come later, and thinking about the families of the men he killed was one of the things that kept him up at night. Those emotions never stopped him from doing what was necessary however, and he was considered by those who knew about him to be one of the most dangerous men in the world.

As he was thinking about all of this, David’s journey had proceeded apace and half an hour after getting into the black saloon, he was climbing in the air and flying steadily towards his final destination, London. As he sat in the comfortable leather chair, he knew this would be a big one by sheer virtue of the fact that they had sent the Citation for him. By now bored of his silent companions, he settled into his seat, put his ear phones back in and tried to get some sleep. He had no idea when he’d have the chance to have a rest again.

It took just under half an hour for the plane to arrive at Stansted, where he was met by another four door car which had been waiting for him at the airport. Again the driver said nothing, he didn’t need to. David knew it was there to take him to headquarters. As before the journey was conducted in complete silence, but he’d done this enough times to know what to expect and didn’t even try to strike up a conversation. Instead, lounging across the back seat, he did his best to get back to sleep for that last part of the journey.

When the car finally glided to a halt after an hour’s drive into London, David looked up and saw the familiar building with that ever foreboding entrance looming over him. As the driver opened his door, he then nodded his thanks before stepping onto the kerb and examining the building in front of him.

It had an impressive facade, made completely out of white stone that seemed to shine when the sun was out, not that it was very often. The entrance was a pair of translucent glass doors, and in front loomed a colonnade that stretched up as high as the first floor where it supported part of the building, that projected out towards the pavement. David knew this was a later extension included during rebuilding after bomb damage during the Second World War.

The style of the building was very much Neoclassical in keeping with its original appearance and similar to many other places around London; set back from the street, symmetrical and impressive. The building itself was formed of three distinct sections, one on the right, and one of the left which were the same height, and a central block that rose another story above those. Leading up to the doors was a couple of stone steps, only slightly worn by the passing of hundreds of feet walking in and out. To one side there was a ramp leading to the underground sections and the garage both for company vehicles and personal ones.

Walking up the steps and through the glass doors, which opened automatically as he slowly approached, David strolled calmly into the lobby looking like he was just out for an afternoon wander. As always his first impression of the lobby was that it looked like it could belong to any high level law firm or bank.

Shiny white marble covered the floor, there were four lifts either side of the main doors that served the left and right segments, going up four floors and down a further three floors underground. Directly facing the front doors was a large wooden desk, behind which were two women who looked like receptionists, not looking very busy as usual. But then they weren’t there to direct people or take messages, anybody in that building already knew where they were going and any calls would be going to a specific office, not the lobby. As usual between the desk and the doors was a bustling crowd of suited men and women hurrying to and fro, often with arms full of paperwork of one kind or another.

Ignoring the suited crowd milling around, David pushed his way towards a lift at the very back of the lobby, past the wooden desk, rather than the ones to the sides of the main doors. As he walked forward, he nodded a greeting to the two women sitting behind the curving wooden desk directly in front of the lift. But he didn’t stop, and they didn’t try to slow his progress, instead he just kept striding right past them and into the waiting steel box.

Not having to press a button, because there weren’t any, he waited for a moment before the lift lurched into life, beginning a long ascent right up to the very top floor, five stories above the street and accessible only from that lift. The central segment the lift served had nothing between the lobby he’d gotten in on, and the fifth floor. The lift itself was heavily reinforced, formed from titanium, steel alloy and designed to be impenetrable to almost every kind of attack, but then the person at its summit was considered very important by Her Majesty’s Government.

Stepping out at the summit, David stared straight ahead for a moment. There was only one direction he could walk in and that was along a very short corridor, which only housed a sofa for those waiting to be summoned, and through the door in front of him. But behind that door was the man responsible for his current state of employment, a man who’d used his abilities on many occasions with little consideration for his own wishes. It was something he still wasn’t happy about, and it had been nearly three years now.

Walking up to the wooden door in front on him, David paused and examined the plain wood for a moment. Partly he was just making the man on the other side wait; partly he just couldn’t bring himself to walk down this road again. Eventually though he knew he had to go in and put his hand to the brass door handle. Twisting slightly he pushed the door lightly and it silently swung open, allowing him to stride purposefully into the office.

Normal etiquette would then dictate that he pause to check that the man he’d come to see was even available, but he’d long ago made a habit of not offering such niceties and instead continued on his path straight across the room to then finish in front of a mahogany desk that certainly appeared antique. Stopping for a moment, he stared at the only other person in the office, the occupant of the desk, and waited.

Seemingly ignoring David’s impetuous and intrusive arrival, the occupant of the desk continued to work his way methodically through the pile of paperwork on his desk, taking a file from the pile to his left, looking through it, signing it, and then consigning it to the completed pile on the right hand side of the desk before taking another file. David meanwhile stood patiently, wondering whether this was the same pile of files that he’d seen the man working through the last time he’d been in this office.

After a few minutes of silence he grew tired of waiting and cleared his throat impatiently. As the sound echoed throughout the otherwise silent office, the occupant finally raised his head and once again the appearance of the man in front of him had David wondering, as always, whether he was in fact in the right office.

Chapter 3

The man in front of him looked like he was in his late forties, with black hair going steadily grey. Even from his seated position at the desk, the man could clearly be seen to have a powerful build with wide set shoulders. David wasn’t small, standing at roughly five foot ten, but this man seemed to dwarf him, and as always his breadth, as well as his height, would have marked him out in a crowd.

That impressive build was clad in an expensive business suit that could have belonged to any number of high ranking bankers, lawyers or politicians. The man’s eyes however decried all of those potential careers and instead pointed to a far deadlier one. They also confirmed to David that this was a man with power and influence; they were dark brown and yet held immeasurable power and intelligence. He knew that they were the eyes of someone who’d not only seen death, but had caused it as well.

For a moment the two sets of eyes held each other, the young student’s and the Director’s. Eventually though David was forced to look away by the sheer intensity of the other man’s gaze. He broke the silence as he did so, “I thought you were going to give me a holiday after the last mission?” The tone was outwardly respectful but there was no mistaking the undercurrent of insolence and irritation, and the older man looked up sharply as he detected it.

“You’ll be called when you’re needed. Holidays only last as long as there’s nothing you can be doing for the sake of national security.” The Director’s voice carried a firm tone that sounded like that of a stern teacher talking to a troublesome pupil, but the undercurrent carried a weight of authority no one would dare argue with.

At these words, which he had heard many times, David sighed, deeply and regretfully, before saying, “As you’ve said on other occasions, Sir. I had hoped you’d let me finish a term at university this time around though. That doesn’t matter now though, I’m here so what’s the mission?”

At this the Director smiled, showing white teeth as near to perfect as possible and David couldn’t help but wonder, not for the first time, whether his job had a dental package thrown in as a perk. The smile came nowhere near the man’s eyes however, and looked wholly superficial as he motioned for David to take a seat in one of the leather wingback chairs in front of the fire, which as always was blazing merrily to one side in the dark and cold office.

Sitting as directed, David reflected that this was an unusual turn of events. Normally he’d be just given a mission file and sent off to meet his handler before going to his own office to learn the mission’s particulars. If he was being briefed on the mission by the Director himself, then whatever was going on was much bigger and more important than he’d originally guessed. To his knowledge the Director almost never involved himself in operations, unless they were something very worrying indeed.

“We have a serious situation here and we need you because it would take too long to construct a strong enough cover otherwise. The fact is what we know terrifies us but we know next to nothing. While we try and get a clearer picture we need someone on site just in case now, and that person needs to be you.” As the Director spoke, David detected a note of concern and worry in his voice. This in itself was enough to have alarm bells ringing. He’d never heard the Director sound worried before. No matter what the mission was, he’d never shown any concern about the threat.

Then without warning the Director leaned forward and began to fill David in on what little was known. “MI5 has uncovered intelligence that the London Stock Exchange is going to be attacked at some point in the near future. The intelligence is concrete but there’s no follow up, no details, and no idea of a timetable. This is worrying, we know it’s going to happen but whoever is planning it is smart enough not to leave any kind of trail that could lead us to them or any details of what’s going to happen exactly or when.” Now that he’d heard what was going on, David understood exactly why the Director was worried.

Normally when he was given a mission he had huge volumes of intelligence related to the suspects and their objectives, motives, methods and so on. Without any of that intelligence, trying to conduct any kind of preventative operation was near impossible. The Department was flying in the dark on this one and that was sure to have people worried. For one of the most connected intelligence units in the world, the fact they couldn’t find anything linked to this plot was in itself both a feat on the part of the perpetrators and a worry for The Department.

“How is this possible?” he asked, “How is it that we know it’s going to happen and yet know nothing about it?”

The Director remained silent for a moment, seemingly not hearing David’s question, but eventually he looked up. “The original intelligence came from a laptop recovered in a compound in Afghanistan by a Special Forces team. When analysing the information on the laptop, MI5 uncovered some emails which when decrypted detailed that preparations had begun for this attack. The cell must have realised they were compromised though as the email accounts haven’t been used since and no further intelligence has been uncovered relating to the plot.”

“Do we suspect anyone, Sir?” Even as he asked the question, David knew the answer even as it was said aloud a moment later. He just couldn’t believe that The Department, an organisation with contacts and resources worldwide and the ability to do almost anything knew nothing.

“We don’t,” the Director said, not quite able to mask how disturbing he found this fact in his tone of voice; “but we don’t think it’s any of the usual suspects. Nothing’s certain though and the ultimate planners of this attack have covered their tracks well so it could be anyone.”

As he digested this information David wondered exactly how he could help in this situation. Then he decided he might as well ask the obvious question, “So what exactly is it that I can do, Sir?”

At this the Director looked hard at the young man sitting across from him, and David was shocked to see uncertainty stamped across the aging face. “All we have is a long shot. We want you to go undercover at the London Stock Exchange. What we need is detailed information on the ground about what’s going on in the Stock Exchange. This attack is going to need serious planning so we have to assume that they’re going to stake out the building to assess the security and so on. One of the emails also mentioned that the group had turned one of the lawyers working at the Stock Exchange so I also want you to locate this person, whoever they are, and take them out of the equation.”

As the plan was laid out in front of him David realised why the Director looked so uncertain. The task ahead was massive. It could take weeks to work out who the traitor was, even if they’d left enough of a trail to follow. The chances of the plan working were so slim that it was ridiculous, but it might be the only chance The Department had to avert catastrophe.

“A long shot you say,” David finally broke the silence that had once again crept around the office, “well I’d say that’s pushing it, Sir. But seeing as we don’t have another option I’d better get to work hadn’t I? What’s the cover?”

“We’ve arranged for you to join the Stock Exchange as a trainee lawyer ostensibly for work experience; however you won’t be confined to any one place and certainly not to a desk. No matter what’s going on in the day to day running of the Exchange, you’ll be kept moving around the place; it should give you a chance to get a good overview of the place and be in some kind of position to see anything suspicious.” The Director paused for a moment, as if waiting for David to respond in some way.

He didn’t notice however, instead he was currently wrestling with the thought that he’d somehow have to investigate potentially dozens of people to see whether they were working with the planners of this attack.

After a few moments of silence the Director realised he wasn’t going to get a reaction for the moment and finished outlining David’s mission. “You should also be in a position to meet most of those who might be the traitor. We’ve also got one of the senior lawyers at the Exchange on board and she’s provided a list of potential suspects. We’re now cross-referencing the names against all of our databases. That should allow you to narrow down who the traitor might be and hopefully we’ll be able to take them out of the game before long.”

David frowned for a moment as he thought over the plan before deciding to point out what he saw as the spanner in the works. “Excuse me, Sir, but to point out the obvious I’m not a lawyer and I know nothing about law, so how exactly am I going to fit in with my cover?”

At this the Director looked grave before giving David the worst possible answer. “We’ve decided not to put you straight into the Stock Exchange. Instead we’re going to take a big chance that the terrorists won’t act immediately. You’ll be spending the next two weeks reading up on the relevant law so that you’ll be able to fit in. In fact we’ve helped you by providing all the information you could possibly need. Here.”

With that the Director got up and walked back to his desk, rummaged through the piles of paperwork for a moment before returning to the chairs in front of the fire and holding out a small USB drive. Taking it, David knew instantly that he was going to be in for several weeks of nonstop studying, every bit as hard as the work he would have been doing at university. “Well, I’d better be off and get started then hadn’t I? Lot’s to read if I know anything about the background reading you give me. Was there anything else, Sir?”

The Director thought for a moment, his eyes glancing towards the mantelpiece above the fire, as if trying to think if there was a reason David couldn’t leave right then. All of a sudden though his eyes lit up as he remembered something else and he gave David his last instructions. “There’s just one last thing before you go. I’ve decided you should have a refresher course. I want you prepared for anything on this one, although it won’t be possible for you to be armed inside the Stock Exchange. So sometime in the next week I want you to talk to the Quartermaster and remind yourself of your combat skills.”

At this David smiled slightly as he stood up and began to head for the door back to the elevators. Just before he reached the door though, he turned back to his superior and, still smiling, said “That’s one thing you don’t need to worry about Sir.”

With that he walked out of the office and headed into the waiting lift, leaving the Director staring at the closed door. For a moment the Director remained frozen in place in front of the fire, and as he sat the one thought kept going through the older man’s mind. Was he right? Was David capable of succeeding here, on a mission that he would’ve been reluctant to give to even his most experienced agents? Even as he thought about these things though, he knew that no matter how he felt about his course of action the simple fact was that he hadn’t had any choice. The Director just hoped was that David did what he always did and excelled.

While the Director wondered whether the mission had a chance of success, David had arrived back at the lobby and this time walked to the lifts positioned left of the welcome desk. Arriving just in time to see the doors on one of the lifts open, he walked inside and immediately pressed the button for the fourth floor of the right hand tower. As the lift lurched into movement, he looked again at the USB in his hand and decided not to bother looking over the Law information before he got home that night. Instead he resolved to look over the Stock Exchange and the intelligence information, before getting into the task of learning all the law he’d need to know for his cover.

This decided he turned back to the lift doors, just in time to feel the lift shudder to a halt and the doors opened with a barely noticeable hiss. Stepping out of the impenetrable metal box, David paused for a moment as he got his bearings before setting off towards his office.

Chapter 4

As he walked, David remembered the first time he’d walked along those corridors. It had been a rainy day in late April, two years and eleven months ago almost exactly. He’d just turned sixteen and had been confronted with a life or death situation, during which he’d been forced to watch his parents being brutally murdered. To survive he’d killed the perpetrators, doing so without hesitation, concern or emotion.

As he’d been escorted along the corridor that day, the sixteen year old boy hadn’t been afraid, even though he should have been and there’d been no regrets, remorse or grief that day, in fact he’d shown almost no emotion whatsoever. Emotion had struck him the day after, when he understood what had happened with such terrifying force that in his complete devastation he’d refused to leave his hotel room for a whole day, even going so far as to refuse to eat anything.

Remembering that day, he found himself reliving old memories and recalling various emotions, all of which had nearly destroyed him on a couple of occasions over the years. They were recollections that he actively tried to keep locked at the back of his mind, far from the active part of his brain. At that moment he was unexpectedly distracted by a voice from behind him. Turning on the spot, he looked round to see a young man in his late twenties, with close cropped dark blonde hair, blue eyes and a slight build covered in a dark suit, hurrying towards him.

“Alright man, how have you been? What the hell are you doing back here already?”

As the young man asked these questions, David couldn’t help but smile as he replied, feeling abnormally at ease as he spoke to one of the only good friends he’d made within The Department. “I’ve been good thanks Stirling; they’ve hauled me back for another job though so I was just on my way to my office to get started on all the prep work. I’m in a bit of a hurry, but if you’ve got time walk with me.”

Stirling laughed at that and said, “Seriously mate, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Jack? I’ve got a few minutes spare though, so what’s going on?” Even before he’d gotten an answer, David had turned and continued walking along the corridor towards his office.

Not commenting on this, Jack fell into step beside his young friend and continued to question him without hesitating. “So how’s Uni going?” he asked.

“Good thanks,” David eventually replied, “I just wish I’d actually get some time off to actually let me finish a full term sometime. I’m a fresher and I’ve already lost a couple of weeks last term for a mission, now I’m missing the end of this term. It does make it harder to keep my grades up and so on.”

Jack laughed at that and as David turned to look at him with confusion plastered across his face, he answered the silent question. “You must be the only student on the planet who’s worried about time out because of his grades rather than being away from the social scene. When I was at university we went out every night and all of our grades suffered as a result.”

Shrugging David just said, “I reckon it’s probably safer if I don’t get drunk and besides I find clubs boring. Normally I just head down to the bar and have a couple of drinks with a few friends rather than go out hard.”

Jack just nodded at this; he knew David did everything possible to remain in control of himself at all times. It was something that almost defined the young man, so it made sense that he’d avoid heavy drinking like the plague for that exact reason. Not to mention the fact that if he lost control there was no telling how much damage he’d be capable of causing. As he thought this through, David continued talking and Jack’s mind tuned back into the conversation.

“Not to mention the excuse I was given when I went back was so stupidly weak I’m surprised my friends haven’t raised any suspicions about where I went. Apparently I had appendicitis for three weeks, and yet the scar is on the wrong side and far longer than it should be. Anyway, how’s things been here?” As he asked this, David glanced sideways at Jack in time to see a slight look of shock on his friend’s face, not that that was surprising.

He’d been working for The Department for nearly three years and he’d never shown much concern for it. In fact for much of that time, Jack had noticed him displaying a complete contempt for everything to do with The Department and his position with them. That being said, in the last year he’d definitely begun to change his attitude. While he still grumbled about The Department, Jack got the impression that secretly David had accepted it as an important part of his life, at least for now.

Then a slight cough from David reminded Jack he owed the young man an answer and as always he gave David the brutal facts straight up rather than beating around the bush. “We’ve had some mishaps recently. Since the New Year we’ve lost three Agents and a further six have been put in hospital. Things have been pretty hairy recently and they aren’t getting much better. The really worrying thing is this business with the Stock Exchange doesn’t smell right, something else is going on there.”

David nodded at that, “I agree, I’ve been up with the Director just now and from what he’s told me whoever’s behind the plot is far more organised and prepared than your run of the mill terror cell. The fact we know nothing about them is proof of that. Whatever they’re planning it’s not going to be solved simply or bloodlessly, and I get the feeling that there are going to be serious casualties on all sides before this is over.”

By now the two of them had arrived at a frosted glass door that had “Ryder” stencilled on it in black lettering. Fishing his keys out of his pocket, David turned to Jack and said, “Anyway I’ll see you later mate, I’d better be getting on with this work otherwise I’ll have the Director on my back about it.”

Jack nodded once before saying “See you later mate,” and left, walking down the corridor while David walked into his office alone.

As the door closed softly behind him, he looked around. The bookshelves were still filled with the mixture of former case files and detective novels he’d kept it stock with since moving in. A metal desk sat in the middle of the room and had the usual assortment of stationary found on any desk in any office around the world. The most important thing in the office though was a state of the art computer dominating the very centre of the desk.

Walking across the room, he slung his jacket across the back of the comfortable leather chair sat behind the desk and sat down, turning on the computer as he did so. Almost immediately there was a hum from the fan and moments later the screen lit up with the normal windows start up graphics and noise. Settling back into his chair, he waited a few more moments for the log in screen to pop up and when it did he rapidly entered his username and password before hitting the enter key.

The subsequent wait for the computer to log on didn’t take long and after only a couple of seconds David was greeted with the sight of his wallpaper. It was a picture of him with his parents, one of the few he had of the three of them together. Now he could get to work.

First he plugged the Director’s USB into the port on the computer and accessed the data on it. The first thing to notice was the information was neatly organised into three folders. One was labelled “Intelligence”, another “London Stock Exchange” and the last was “Law and Cover Information”.

Looking at the size of the folders, it was obvious that the first would contain all of the original intelligence collected from the laptop in Afghanistan and hopefully an account of the raid as well. He knew from experience how important it was to reassess all available information as it might lead to new clues being discovered.

The second folder was larger and it would be useful in allowing him to know everything possible about his operating environment. In the past that had sometimes been the difference between life and death for him, and the people he was up against.

The third folder was by far the largest and would likely contain both more information than he could ever read or need and most of it would likely be incredibly dense. With that in mind he decided to ignore it for the moment and tackle that after he’d gone through everything else.

Instead he focused on the first folder and began by opening it, opening up a short list of documents in the folder. He immediately zeroed in on one titled “Afghanistan report” and opened it. A long text document then appeared on the screen in front of him as he settled back into his chair and began reading up on the operation in Afghanistan and the intelligence this had yielded.

The first impression the report yielded was how normal it seemed. The initial information leading to the raid had been credible, a simple top off about a Taliban presence at a standard compound in the middle of nowhere in Helmand province. There’d been nothing unusual about what the team had initially found either, roughly half a dozen Taliban fighters who were quickly subdued and restrained ready to be returned to base for questioning and the materials in the base had been the normal mix of explosives and weapons. Then there was the room where the importance of the mission had gone from nothing special to critical as the strike team came across a trapdoor that led to a command centre. Inside there was a goldmine of information regarding the local Taliban operations and it was there the laptop had been found. Initially it had been believed that the laptop was connected to the Taliban and that they were the ones planning the Stock Exchange attack. This was quickly discounted when the information was decrypted and it became clear that whoever had been using the laptop was part of a different organisation entirely.

Disappointingly though there was nothing else from the action report that suggested anything more about the motives of this new enemy. All the other information found in the command centre had been positively attributed to the Taliban forces in the area and there hadn’t been any chatter coming from in country that gave any information on potential allies or interlopers in Taliban territory.

Having finished reading about the original operation, David turned his attention to the other files in the folder, which included transcripts of the emails picked off the laptop. Having leant forward earlier while reading the details of the report, he now sat back and worked his way through everything else.

Despite the “Intelligence” folder being by far the smallest of the three, it still took him nearly three hours to work his way through everything. In that time he read not only the after action report on the raid but also the steps taken to decrypt the emails, the emails themselves and the details of the subsequent failed attempts to find out more about the attack.

Having finished the first folder, he navigated back to the root menu of the USB and this time selected the “London Stock Exchange” folder. As he saw the long list of documents load in front of him though, he decided he needed a break.

Logging off the computer, he got up from the chair he’d been sat in for the last three hours. Despite his chair being very comfortable, after three hours large parts of his body had seized up and he had to pause for a moment to stretch before doing anything else. Once the stiffness was gone he left the office, pausing only to lock it, and once in the corridor wondered where to go. A grumble from his stomach made his decision for him as he realised the last meal he’d had was breakfast that morning and it according to his watch it was nearly four in the afternoon.

With the thought of food uppermost in his mind, he walked back towards the lifts and this time when he got in selected the first floor. On the right section of the building this was home to the canteen and the prospects of a meal, which by now David was very much looking forward to. The meals at The Department were often relatively good, even when compared to most restaurants.

As the lift began its descent, he couldn’t help but go over everything that he’d learned in the last three hours. There were too many inconsistencies, he decided, for the discovery of the intelligence to be anything but deliberate. That meant it had been planted, and that meant they’d been supposed to crack the encryption and read the emails. Therefore rather than a chance find, it was a taunt from the terrorists. That possibility disturbed David, but he also saw the flaw it highlighted in the terrorist’s mindset, they were arrogant and overconfident, sure of their inevitable success. He knew from experience that men like that could be forced into making mistakes.

Chapter 5

By the time these he’d finished working this through, he’d arrived at the first floor and the canteen, which was still half full of people. This was normal as most agents’ odd working hours meant they had to eat when they had time rather than normal meal times. Walking towards the counter, he grabbed a tray, cutlery, and a bottle of coke from a fridge, before moving in front of the servers who served him up a bowl of pasta and meatballs. Now with a full meal in front of him, he wasted no time in paying and walked straight to the nearest empty table.

Sitting down, he seized his fork and began to demolish the bowl of pasta, his appetite taking over completely. After a few minutes of focused eating however he was interrupted by another arrival on his table. Looking up, he saw he’d been joined by two familiar, and smiling, faces.

One was Stirling’s; the other belonged to Mary Hall, another agent he’d become friends with during his time. Smiling at his friends, David greeted them both warmly. “Alright guys, everything alright?”

At this Jack laughed out loud before answering his friend, while Mary just smiled even wider at David’s question. “Well things are fine with us. We’ve just been reassigned. I think it might be you who’ll be having a problem soon though; we’ve been pulled for the Stock Exchange mission. In fact we’re your mission controllers, the Director said something about needing people he could trust to hold your reins if it came down to it.”

David laughed at Jack’s words, and was still smiling as he answered, “And he thought you’d be able to do that? God it’s like the man doesn’t even know me. Still it’ll be good working with you again, Jack.”

“And what about me?” came Mary’s response, and David looked up at the young woman. She was of medium height with light blonde hair with a few streaks of darker brown running through it and clear blue eyes. Anyone who looked at her would never have thought she was a spy, but he knew from experience she was as deadly as anyone in the SAS. It was an indicator of how serious The Department was in preparing their agents for operations.

“Of course it’ll be good working with you as well Mary. Why are you here though, you didn’t need to ambush me in the canteen to let me know we’d be working together.” At that the expressions around the table became more serious and David realised they were there to discuss the mission.

But the canteen wasn’t the place to do it and they knew that, so they’d come here to collect him for a discussion after they’d finished eating. Giving a curt nod of understanding, David turned back to his bowl of pasta and quickly finished it off. He then picked up his coke and got up, followed by the other two, with Jack leading the way out.

The trio said nothing on the way to the conference room Jack had reserved for their use during the afternoon. David, left alone with his thoughts, returned to his idea that the intelligence was a taunt from the terrorists rather than an opportune find. He also knew he should share his theory with the others; he could count on them at least to take him seriously. But that could wait for them to be somewhere private.

Meanwhile the other two wrestled with their own thoughts, in particular was one they both felt, which related to their young friend. His record and abilities couldn’t be argued with. But, as they often did, Jack and Mary both wondered whether it was right for someone who’d barely lived to be put in the kind of life and death situations they were expected to deal with. Jack in particular struggled with this. He’d grown to look at David as the brother he’d never had, and now he was going to have to be directly responsible for him on this mission.

Fortunately all further thoughts and doubts from David’s friends were forestalled by their arrival at the conference room. Keying in the code for the door, Jack went in first, followed by David and then Mary bringing up the rear. Once all three were inside, Jack closed and locked the door, preventing any disturbances. Meanwhile David and Mary sat at the central table in the room, facing a screen against the back wall; meanwhile Jack turned on the computer in the corner of the room and turned on the projector.

As the three agents waited for the computer to load up, David decided it was time to share his theory with the other two. Clearing his throat loudly, he waited for his audience to turn their attention to him before saying, “Hey guys? I take it you read up on the intelligence we got for this mission?” As his words hung in the air and Jack and Mary processed them, David sat back, waiting for a response, which came after a short of silence.

“Of course, we’ve all been read in on the Afghanistan raid and the subsequent discovery of the emails and their decryption. Why do you ask?” As he asked this Jack found David’s eyes fixed upon his own, holding him in an almost hypnotic and uncomfortable stare as the younger man assessed whether he was going to be believed.

Deciding that it was better continue down the path he’d started, David began to outline his theory on the intelligence. “Did you think there was anything wrong with the way we found the intelligence?”

“No, why? Do you think there’s something more to it?” As Jack said this, David breathed an internal sigh of relief, he knew now that at least one person would seriously consider what he was about to say.

Glancing at Mary briefly as well, he took a deep breath before explaining himself. “I thought it was odd the fact we found the intelligence at all,” he said. That seemed to catch their interest, and that only grew as he continued to speak, saying, “I mean for a terrorist network that we knew nothing about before that raid and one we haven’t heard about since, don’t you think it’s strange that they happened to leave a laptop with key information for Special Forces to find?”

As he spoke, David saw his words were certainly striking a chord with Jack, who was clearly thinking hard about what was being said, and discovering moment by moment that there was more and more to it than was originally thought. “Okay mate, why do you think we found that laptop then?” was the inevitable question, and the one that David had been hoping his friend would ask. It meant Jack thought he might be right and was willing to entertain the possibility that things weren’t as they seemed.

As he was asked the question, David resisted the urge to smile, especially when he looked at Mary who was also clearly considering his thoughts as being perfectly plausible. “I think that this wasn’t a chance find. I think we were supposed to find that laptop and decrypt those emails and the reason is that the terrorists are so certain of success they’re taunting us. I looked at the decryption programme used and in the end it wasn’t a particularly complex encryption system, our software had cracked it in less than six hours. If the terrorist who’d written that email had wanted the information to stay secret it could have been made much harder for us.” As he finished speaking, David looked at Jack and saw that his idea had had an effect.

After only a few more moments thinking over what had been said, Jack was on the phone to the Director and shortly after there was a knock on the door. It opened to reveal the Director standing there with several more agents and analysts in tow representing the rest of the team attached to the Stock Exchange mission.

Over the next few minutes, Jack told the assembled group everything he’d been told. As he finished, there was a stunned silence from his audience as the other agents and analysts tried to digest the full implications of what had been suggested. Following the stunned silence though there was near pandemonium as the room began to argue about what to do now the mission had become a trap.

As David watched in silence, and incredulity and how quickly a team had gone to war with itself, he saw the Director looking at him. The older man’s gaze said more than words ever could have and David knew what it was. He’d seen it enough times during his employment and he knew that the mission had to go forward despite the dangers; too many lives were at risk to pull the plug. Having received the message, he nodded once in answer to the unspoken question of whether he was still happy to go undercover at the Stock Exchange.

As David nodded, the Director got up from his chair and as he moved the rest of the room fell silent. All eyes turned to him as the team waited for his verdict on whether the mission was going forward. Before speaking he took time to look at everyone in his audience, and when he did begin to speak, they were in turn hanging on his every word. “We’re discussing this like we have the choice to scrap the mission. The fact is that this attack on the Stock Exchange will go ahead regardless, and it’s our task to do what we can to protect the people who’ll be inside when it happens. Does anyone here dispute that?”

The Director paused for a moment to allow his audience to digest the question and give them time to think it over before he continued. “No? Well then we’d better get back to work and ensure we’re prepared for every eventuality. Ryder is still going in undercover to monitor the situation. This gives us an edge as information about him is effectively nonexistent and the opposition won’t even know he even exists let alone his capabilities.”

Again there was a pause and he could see his audience nodding slightly at his words, they all knew how good David was in any operational situation and if The Department ever had an edge it was that nobody would have expected him to even exist. It made him invisible in the eyes of their enemies, and afforded him the element of surprise on almost all operations.

“So since we’re agreed that we have to move forward, we’d all better get back to work in preparing for this mission. I want everything looked at again, go over it all with a fine tooth comb. Meanwhile David, I want you continuing with your reading, you need to be up to speed as soon as possible. So everyone, get to it.” As the Director finished speaking there was an instant explosion of activity as people immediately began hurrying out of the room to continue preparations for the mission.

Whether it was going back over everything taken as true until then or continuing to assess the flaws, weaknesses of the Stock Exchange or trying to narrow down the list of possible suspects for the traitor, everyone was energised and getting on with the job at hand. It took no time at all for the room to empty, leaving only David and his friends with the Director. Turning to him, the Director smiled slightly, and said, “This is one we can’t afford to make a mistake on. Be careful, be attentive and get the job done with minimum fuss.” Then he was gone and the three agents were left alone.

“Well, now that everyone else has gone off to get to work, I suppose we’d better get on with it as well. I’ll get going in my office; I still need to study the London Stock Exchange in detail, blueprints, floor plans, the different departments and so on. That information will be important when I get in there. Then when I’ve finished that lot I need to get started on learning how to be a lawyer.” As David spoke, he saw his friends smile slightly and then the three of them went their separate ways back to their offices.

David walked briskly and was back in his office chair, sat in front of the computer, only a couple of minutes after leaving the conference room. Once he was settled and logged back in, he knew there was nothing left to do except read until he couldn’t look at the screen anymore, and then it would be time to go home.

Chapter 6

Four hours later, he finally decided that he’d had enough of staring at his computer screen. Getting up from his desk, David reached for the phone on his desk and called down to the motor pool. “It’s Ryder; I need to check my car out. Can you have it ready for me when I get there? I’m leaving the office now.”

“Certainly, your car will be waiting for you.” As soon as the voice on the other end finished speaking, David put the phone down and gathered his things together. He grabbed the USB out of the computer, shut it down, and grabbed his jacket, then turned off the lights as he left the office and locked up.

It only took a few moments to reach the lift, and once inside he pressed the button for the first basement floor and the lift instantly began to move. As he headed towards the motor pool, he felt his mobile vibrate and taking it out saw he had a new text. Opening up the new message, he saw it was from Amanda, one of his friends at university, asking where he’d gone.

Smiling to himself, David realised that he hadn’t considered his absence would be discovered so quickly, although he should’ve known she would notice bearing in mind she lived in his house, which wasn’t all that big. As he stared at the message, he wondered how her day had been. She’d probably had lectures followed by a long stint in the library; she was a historian after all. He also wondered idly whether his friends had gotten to tea yet and if so what had been on offer in the canteen.

It was then that he considered the matter of replying in some fashion, and if so then what should he say? Eventually he decided that it would be better to let the Director sort out the lies and he should just lie to the terrorists and criminals not friends. Having come to this conclusion, he put his phone back in his left trouser pocket, just as the lift stopped at the first basement floor.

Stepping out of the lift, he looked around the garage for a moment before walking in the direction of the exit, which was where he normally collected his car from. As he picked his way through the endless rows of black cars, ranging from saloons to four wheel drives, he couldn’t help but chuckle to himself. It seemed to him very clichéd for a spy service to almost exclusively use black cars.

However an engine sound then made him turn around and his smile broadened as he acknowledged his own clichéd choice of car, just as his Aston Martin DB9 drew up beside him. The driver got out and nodded to him before walking away, leaving the engine running and David got in, put his seatbelt on and then set off back home.

The drive out of London was slow as always, but eventually the traffic thinned, largely because by then it was after seven at night, and he was able to pick up some speed. That meant he began to see the signs for Stansted, near where he lived, nearly an hour and a half after leaving headquarters. Turning off the motorway he continued to drive until he began to see signs for Bishop’s Stortford, at which point he left the main roads and turned onto smaller back roads. Another twenty minutes of driving saw him then finally turn onto the long gravel drive leading up to his home, which finally came into view five minutes later.

It was an impressive building, even in the gloom of the night, the house dominating the flat fields around it. The front facade appeared traditional, and indeed the casual observer would be forgiven for thinking the building was a Victorian country manor house. The fact was though that it had been standing less than twenty years, having only been built a year before he had been born. The front doors were made of dark wood and were only visible as a silhouette against the lighter stone of the building. They stood at the top of a short flight of steps and on either side dark windows kept watch over the drive. In the darkness the building was very imposing indeed, but in the light it often took on a more beautiful appearance using the contrast with the surrounding landscape to create an image not easily forgotten.

Coasting up past the front of the house, the car’s tires crunching on the gravel with every metre, David pointed a remote control for the garage door he’d picked out of the glove box and pressed a button. Immediately the garage door, concealed to look like part of the stone wall and opening to the right side of the door, slid smoothly open. Wasting no time he guided the Aston Martin into the empty space of the garage and switched off the engine.

Getting out of the car, he paused and looked around his surroundings for a moment, taking in the familiar surroundings. The garage interior was very spartan, constructed entirely out of concrete with no decoration whatsoever. Turning to his immediate left he noted the two extra bays both occupied by slightly more subtle cars than the Aston. Then there was the door leading up into the rest of the house. Pausing at the door he laid his hand on the brass handle and for a moment it felt like he was truly coming home, and that behind the door he was going to find his parents waiting for him. But they were dead and nothing had been the same since that day, at least not for him. Then, shaking the ghosts of the past out of mind and out of sight, he walked out of the garage and into the house proper, pausing only to turn the lights on, as he made his way to the kitchen.

On the way he continued to take in the familiar sights of the house he’d been living in since he was seven. Everything was as he’d left it, including the lack of food in the kitchen cupboards. So after taking a moment to think in the kitchen, he began rummaging around and eventually found the takeaway menus he was looking for. Going through the list, he decided on his favourite curry house for dinner.

Walking into the living room, David picked up the phone, called up the restaurant, and asked for his normal order, a Chicken Tikka Massala with Pilau Rice and a Keema Naan. After the voice on the other end told him it would be roughly forty five minutes and signed off, he sat down on the sofa, grabbed the TV remote and switched it on. Scrolling through the programme guide, he found a repeat of Top Gear, a personal favourite and sat back to watch the Bolivia special on the screen.

As he lay back on the sofa, he thought back to his life before his sixteenth birthday, before he’d begun working for The Department and before he’d been left alone in life. Life had been simpler; there had been less pressure and less stress, and no life or death situations. Instead there had been school every day; a daily routine that hadn’t been subject to sudden changes and no danger of suddenly being called away from his life at the drop of a hat.

Chapter 7

Remembering his former life soon had him reminiscing about his parents who’d always been there for him. There had been his father, the tall soldier attached to The Department. He was sometimes for months at a time, but he always came home, and he never forgot to bring a souvenir for David, something from whichever country he’d been in. David remembered how he and his father had always found time to play hockey together, a sport they’d both enjoyed, but since his father’s death the game had lost most of its appeal. Meanwhile his mother had always been on the sidelines supporting them both, and when his father had been away, David had fond memories of takeaways and films with his mum on the sofa.

Those years had been happy and contented, but now they were over and all because of what had happened on his sixteenth birthday. His father had just finished a mission and had come home only a couple of days before. David meanwhile had been off school for weeks and had been busily revising for his GCSE’s. When his father had come home, David remembered hugging him warmly and for a few days the family had been inseparable, either relaxing together in the house or else walking through the fields together and enjoying the weather when it was good. It had been a happy few days, made more so by the knowledge of his up and coming birthday.

Then the morning of his birthday had come and even the weather had been good. There had been presents, breakfast in bed and a morning spent doing nothing but watching a film. There had been plans for a family day out and then a special meal in the evening, but those plans had been demolished.

The first he had known about the attack was the loud and incessant ringing of the doorbell, it had sounded throughout the entire house and with hindsight he knew it had been the sound of death coming. His father had gone to answer the door, and as he opened it the sound of a sudden gunshot rang out. That was swiftly followed by two more in quick succession, the sound akin to thunder in a storm. His father hadn’t gone quietly though, David recalled arriving at the door in time to see his father snap one of his assailant’s necks, despite bleeding from three gunshot wounds to the chest. Even as that had happened, David been forced to watch, frozen to the spot, as another attacker aim a Browning at his father’s head and fired.

That final shot had finally brought his father to the ground and moments later the muzzle of that same Browning had traversed to focus on David’s own head. Meanwhile two other intruders had walked over the body of their dead comrade and had begun to move deeper into the house, splitting up at the top of the stairs. At that point David’s attention had returned to the gun pointed at his head, the muzzle now a mere couple of inches from his face and looked incredibly menacing. Just before the trigger had been pulled though, his mother had saved him.

Screaming hysterically, she’d distracted the man with the Browning, throwing herself at him. In the struggle that ensued the gun had gone off with a terrifyingly loud bang and David’s mother had fallen to the floor, blood flowing from a wound to her abdomen. Upon seeing his mother fall to the floor, David had exploded with a furious energy and before the murderer knew what had happened, the young boy was upon him.

For a moment he forgot everything he’d ever learned and simply battered at the man with clenched fists, trying to hurt the man as much as possible and running off pure fury. But after a heavy blow from the murderer’s Browning landed on the side of his head, he came back to his senses and began to remember everything his father had taught him. That was the other thing they’d spent their time doing, his father had made sure David was well versed in hand to hand combat, the use of bladed weapons and the use of firearms. Now reeling backwards from the blow, and putting some distance between him and the attacker, David began to assess his opponent more closely, taking in every detail.

He was a tall man, heavy set, well built and looking immensely menacing dressed all in black with a military three point balaclava. The Browning was held laxly against the man’s thigh, a finger through the trigger guard but not resting on the trigger itself. He was clearly an experienced killer, there had been no hesitation when killing David’s parents and David knew the man wouldn’t hesitate to kill him as well. But it was just as clear that the assailant didn’t see the young boy in front of him a real threat, which was clear from his relaxed stance and that, was his mistake. Seizing the initiative he sprang into action.

The man was standing within arm reach, the man’s first mistake and the next was that he took his time to raise his gun. As muzzle came to bear against David’s head it was held with a straight arm, shortening the distance between the pistol and David even further. Using that to his advantage, he seized the wrist holding the Browning before it had reached it’s destination and forced the muzzle up towards the ceiling, inadvertently causing a shot to go off in the struggle.

The assailant then drew his hand back to punch David, his muscles preparing to deliver a heavy blow with tremendous strength. Before he could though, the boy kicked out with his right foot. His foot connected with the man’s knee, eliciting a cry of pain from his opponent and bringing him to the ground.

As the man got back to both feet, David followed up with a knee to the groin and the man doubled over. That was followed up by a knee into the assailant’s man’s face, breaking his nose and causing blood to go everywhere, including all over David’s jeans. With the man groaning on the floor, David retrieved the dropped Browning from where it had fallen onto the carpet.

Holding the gun in both hands, he weighed it in his hands, feeling the balance before checking the clip and seeing there were still nine rounds left. Looking at the man on the floor, David found himself sorely tempted to execute his parents’ killer, but something stopped him and he realised he wasn’t ready to kill in cold blood. Replacing the clip and then cocking the Browning, David decided instead to find the other two assailants who’d gone deeper into the house.

The first he’d found in his parent’s bedroom, trying to crack into the safe in the wardrobe. The man had a pistol beside him and David knew if he revealed himself, he’d likely be shot before he could react. There was also the problem that any gunshot would alert the other intruder and leave him outnumbered. So instead he crept up behind the man silently, staying low and taking care with the placement of his feet. Then when he was within arm reach he employed a single, rapid and deadly move that ended the threat posed by the man. Seizing the man from behind and crushing the trachea in the crook of his elbow, David held on tightly as he slowly choked the man to death.

The following two minutes involved David struggling desperately to maintain his grip as the man, whose throat he was crushing, thrashed frantically. Initially David only intended to render the man unconscious, but the man thrashed so much that even after he fell still, he kept his grip tight for a few more moments. When he then checked, there was no pulse and it was clear he’d finished the job, no matter how unintentional it had been.

Despite having killed a man, David felt no pity and left the bedroom to go in search of the second intruder, who he found moments later rummaging through paper’s in his father’s office. The man was more cautious than his companion however and heard David’s approach just as he entered the doorway. Quickly producing another Browning, the intruder fired several shots out of the open door but David was quicker and managed to press his body against the wall in time to avoid the hail of gun fire. Soon enough the man had emptied his pistol’s clip and David seized his chance, ducked into the doorway and fired twice before the man had even found a second clip. Both shots hit the man centre mass, right over his heart. A perfect double tap, just as David had been taught.

With the second intruder dead, David went back downstairs and had found his mother still breathing, and propped up against the wall. Kneeling down beside her, she’d turned to look up at him with dimming eyes and said, “I love you David.”

At that moment there had been a footfall behind him and David had turned to see the man he’d beaten standing over him, a naked blade in his hand. Reacting quickly David produced, aimed and fired a round from the Browning into the man’s head, all before the man had managed to take two steps towards him. Then he was left alone in the entrance hall, among the dead bodies of his parents and two of the four intruders who had all but destroyed life as he knew it.

Agents from The Department had found him still sat there in the entrance hall cradling the Browning when they arrived two hours later. He’d said nothing to them, and hadn’t resisted as they relieved him of the Browning and gently escorted him out of the house and into a waiting car as a cleanup team had entered the house. While the cleanup team worked in the house, he had been whisked away and taken to Department Headquarters for the first time.

Chapter 8

He’d been taken to the Director’s office and left there alone for an hour and a half. Meanwhile the man himself had spent the time occupied; trying to sort out the mess created by the deaths of one of his agents and his wife. At the same time he’d considered what to do about their now orphaned son, now waiting for him in his office. So David sat alone in a chair in front of the fire in that office, his eyes never wavering from the bright, flickering flames as he obsessed over every detail of the day’s events, replaying it all.

By the end of that hour and a half, the only thing he knew for certain was that he’d been foolish not to kill the man he’d disarmed when he had the chance. Just after coming to this realisation came another one, he’d killed three men in less than ten minutes, and he’d felt no emotion while doing it. That was a worrying thing for the sixteen year old to accept, but he also recognised he had only done what was necessary. Still he knew that he should have felt something; relief, sorrow, anger, grief, in fact feeling any kind of emotion would have been preferable to him at that moment, anything other than the cold emptiness he was currently experiencing.

When the Director did finally arrive, he then had the task of working out the day’s effect on the young boy sat in his office. He knew the response to that concern would ultimately affect his options regarding David and the boy’s future.

The conversation between the two of them had started awkwardly and hadn’t improved as it went on. The Director had started by saying “I’m sorry son, but your parents aren’t coming back.” He’d initially been unsure whether David was in shock or not, the boy’s complete silence was unsettling.

“I know.” The flat tone of David’s voice as he replied almost frightened the Director. He’d never seen someone so young go through so much in one day, and then be so unemotional at the end of it. He couldn’t tell though whether the boy was putting on a brave face, or because he was actually unemotional, if it was the latter though, the boy was a certifiable sociopath and he desperately hoped it was the former.

Still the Director carried on and said, “I was wondering whether you could tell us exactly what happened. Some of the details don’t seem to add up so far and we were wondering if you could fill in the gaps for us.” For a moment David looked the Director in the eyes and the older man almost shivered at the dead gaze he was treated to. It was utterly cold and devoid of emotion, he’d seen that gaze before, it was the look of someone who had seen death, sometimes known as the thousand yard stare.

Then the younger man looked away and began to speak, his tone the same one he’d spoken with earlier, “They knocked at the door, dad went and answered and was shot three times as soon as he opened it. He managed to snap one of their necks before they put another bullet in his head and he went down. Two split off to ransack the house, the last one stayed to kill me. Mum distracted him before he could; she took a bullet for her trouble.”

David then stopped, staying silent long enough to worry the Director enough to prompt the young man in front of him, “And then?”

“And then I beat the guy that killed mum and dad, took his Browning and hunted down the other two. One I choked to death in the bedroom, the other I shot twice in the study. I went back downstairs in time to see mum die, before killing the final guy by shooting him in the head. Does that fill in those gaps for you?” David’s voice had remained the same throughout and it was becoming clear to the Director that if it was an act, then the boy was good enough to win an Oscar. Instead it seemed like he had dissociated himself from the trauma he’d experienced, distancing himself from the consequences of what had happened.

The Director was also astonished at what had actually been said. The men who’d attacked the family were certainly not amateurs. They’d been hardened, experienced and professional killers. They’d been ruthless in their attack and had clearly had no gumption about executing three unarmed people they’d never met. In spite of all of that though, this sixteen year old boy had killed three of them singlehandedly.

“You killed them?” he couldn’t help but ask; the astonishment evident in his voice as he struggled to understand how the boy was still alive.

“Yes,” David replied; his voice still utterly dead pan and his emotionless stare fixed back onto the flames in the fireplace.

“Who trained you then?” was the next question to come from the Director’s mouth as he still struggled to understand how a sixteen year old boy had had the skill set necessary to defend himself.

“My dad taught me self defence since I was seven; he said I’d learn discipline and self sufficiency. When I was a bit older he taught me how to shoot, he seemed to believe it was important that I could take care of myself.”

The Director nodded to himself, his curiosity now satisfied, he turned back to the young man in front of him. Once again David met the older man’s eyes and the dead gaze sent another shiver of discomfort through the older man. He tried a smile though, outwardly attempting to make the situation lighter, but internally his mind was awash with possibilities. He decided to leave things there for the day however rather than put the boy through anything else. So after a few more moments, during which the Director made a very short phone call, David was conducted back downstairs and into another car that took him to a nearby hotel where he’d been checked in for the night.

He hadn’t slept that night, instead he sat in an armchair in the room, staring out of the window and looking over the rooftops of London. He didn’t really take in the view though and despite the windows being wide open he didn’t feel the cold breeze entering the room, instead he continued to think about what had happened. The main thing on his mind was that he still felt nothing more than an all engulfing emptiness, it had been hours since everything had happened but he still felt no emotion either for the loss of his parents or the deaths of the men he’d killed.

By morning however things had changed. Just before dawn, the grief had come crashing over him like a tsunami and he retreated from his chair to the bed where he lay curled into a ball, desperately trying to regain control of his emotions. During the whole of that day there had been several knocks on the door both from hotel staff and Department agents. The former asked if anything was needed, the later asked if he would mind coming back to headquarters to answer more questions. On all occasions, he ignored the knocking and waited for those responsible to leave him alone.

In the space of a day he’d lost his parents and his entire world had seemed to disintegrate. Now as he struggled with his guilt, which felt like it was all consuming, he couldn’t bear to see anyone else. He just wanted everything to go back the way it was, he wanted his parents to walk through the door and say it had all been a hoax. But he knew that no matter how desperately he wished for that, it could never happen. He’d never see them alive again, he’d never hear his mum singing as she cooked again, and his father would never come home with a souvenir from another country. All of that was gone.

By the end of the day things had gotten better. He was out of bed and had taken a shower. The hotel was quite a luxurious one and he’d spent a long time allowing the hot water to give him some semblance of relaxation as his concerns were temporarily dispelled. He’d also managed to dress into some clothes from a bag brought by the agents from his home. Once he was wearing a pair of jeans and a dark blue T-shirt, he decided to order some room service to deal with his starving stomach.

Once he’d eaten a full roast dinner with roast potatoes and mixed vegetables, he’d begun to feel much better but also tired, so he decided to try and get some sleep. He doubted he’d be able to hold the Department agents at bay the next day and it seemed likely he’d be forced to accompany them to meet the Director again.

Chapter 9

The following morning, he woke up feeling well rested after managing to sleep for a solid eight hours. His grief had only slightly lessened but he just about felt able to cope with what lay before him and he was beginning to feel a little more like his old self, although he knew he’d never be the same again. Getting out of bed, he had a quick shower and got dressed, choosing another pair of jeans and a black long sleeved T-shirt today.

By now hungry he left his room and went downstairs to the hotel restaurant, ordering a full English breakfast, minus mushrooms and tomatoes, when he got there. It took only fifteen minutes to arrive, helped largely by the comparative emptiness of the restaurant at eight in the morning. He then ate leisurely, waiting for the inevitable appearance of the men who’d been knocking on his door only the day before.

In the end he had just managed to finish his plate and was sipping a glass of orange juice when he heard a footstep behind him and a silhouette entered his peripheral vision. When David eventually bothered to look up, he saw a man standing there, dressed predictably in a dark suit with hands clasped behind his back, bringing an implied formality to the situation.

“Excuse me Mr. Ryder. I’m sorry to disturb you but the Director has asked me whether you’d be willing to come in today for a conversation regarding your future.” The man’s tone was entirely polite and sounded polished and upper class, but it was also firm and it was obvious the agent hadn’t been making a request.

David didn’t answer for a moment, making the agent wait as he finished his orange juice, and took his time over it. But then he got up, turned to the agent, who appeared to be slightly uncomfortable with the situation or maybe he just didn’t like being late David thought, and said. “Fine. Let me pay my bill and we can go.” While the agent’s tone had been entirely polite, David offered no such courtesy and instead made his irritation at being summoned like a dog obvious.

“Bill’s been paid sir, courtesy of The Department. Now if you wouldn’t mind we need to be off as soon as possible.”

Nodding once, David followed his escort out of the hotel and into a waiting car idling on the road outside. As soon as David was inside and all the doors were closed it quickly whisked him back to the headquarters building. On the way David tried to pay more attention to where he was being taken, but London wasn’t a city he visited often and the roads he was taken along weren’t any he could recognise. That left him very disorientated by the end of the journey. The car parked in the motor pool on the first basement floor and from there he’d quickly been taken through the lobby, into the elevator at the back and all the way up to the Director’s office by the same agent.

This time, instead of being left along for over an hour, the office was already occupied when he entered and as the door opened, the Director was looking up and smiling at the younger man. “Hello David,” he said, “how are you feeling today? I’m glad to see you; I was slightly worried when my agents reported that they got no answer yesterday.”

“I’ve been better,” David answered honestly, “yesterday I just couldn’t bear to see anyone but I’m better today.” That reply seemed to please the Director whose smile widened slightly, although to David the grin on the other man’s face seemed too wide and too toothy to be genuine. That only begged the question of what he was doing there, and what the Director’s motives were.

The answer came soon enough as the Director said, “I’m sure you’re wondering why I’ve asked you here today. The answer is simply because there are some serious questions that have to be asked regarding your future and where exactly you go from here.”

As he heard this, David frowned slightly as he wondered what the other man was talking about, and as he mentally wondered what he actually was going to do from now on. He wouldn’t want for money, he knew that his parent’s had been very well enough financially and he supposed that with his father’s pension he’d be fine as far as money was concerned. The main problem was whether he’d be able to live alone, he didn’t know of any family, certainly there weren’t any relatives he was close to even if they did exist, so the question was would he be allowed to live alone.

Then he realised that the Director was waiting for some kind of response and he decided to do the obvious thing and asked, “Questions about my future? What questions need to be answered?”

Smiling even more now, the Director explained himself, almost like he was a poker player unveiling an unbeatable hand to win the pot. “There are several problems with you just going home and continuing life as normal. The first of which is that I’m not convinced it’s best for you to live on your own now, certainly not without any kind of psychiatric evaluation.” The Director’s tone remained calm and guarded as he said this and David began to feel like he’d been caught in some kind of trap.

“Psychiatric evaluation, why the hell would I need psychiatric evaluation?” David asked, his irritation and even anger becoming evident as he saw the potential for several unpleasant scenarios for his future looming.

“You killed three men the other day, and you did so without hesitation or remorse. If that weren’t enough you then also saw your parents killed in front of you. That can’t have been easy to see and frankly the fact you’ve shown no signs of being affected by any of it makes it all the more important that you get checked out.” As he said this, the Director paused and looked at the young man in front of him, wondering how exactly he would react to the next comment.

David meanwhile stared right back, trying to stare the older man down as he tried to guess the angle the Director was going to try to use, and what other potential cards the man had in his hand.

That second question was answered a moment later when the Director, realising David was waiting for him to go on, said, “The other thing is that you killed three men and while they were criminals, it’s still technically a crime. We have to submit a brief to the CPS about what happened and then I assume that they’ll want to talk to you. In all likelihood you’ll be charged with three counts of manslaughter, charges that could carry a sizable prison sentence.”

David openly frowned at this, although he realised the Director wouldn’t be telling him this if there wasn’t another option open to him. He also knew that the Director was lying, he’d only acted in self defence and under those circumstances he’d done nothing wrong. The fact that the other man was wielding it as a weapon though meant he’d be willing to bend the truth in order to achieve his goals. The question now remaining was what those goals actually were and what would he have to give up to be able to return to living quietly, allowing the events of the other day fading into distant memory.

Unwilling to say anything out loud though, he decided to remain silent until he knew more about the alternative that was sure to be on the way. So he stared at the Director with an openly hostile glare, a glare that clearly unsettled the other man who shuffled in his seat uncomfortably.

The silence didn’t last long before the Director talked outlined his way out for David. “On the other hand there might be a way for us to circumvent that particular scenario.” He said, “It might not be the normal route for us to go in any situation but I believe it could benefit everyone involved.”

“And what would this solution be?” David asked, wondering what was going on and what the man could possibly be talking about. The most worrying thing from his point of view was the way the Director had said the solution would benefit everyone involved, the man’s voice had just sounded untrustworthy, as if his suggestion wasn’t going to be benefitting David much.

“You would work for me. That way the deaths come under national security and you can’t be charged by the CPS,” said the Director, his smile now reminding David of the Cheshire cat’s, almost as if he had won some kind of game.

“And how exactly do you benefit?” David interrupted, wondering what exactly he could be expected to do for The Department at sixteen years old.

“You have the potential to be a great asset to us. Your actions the other day showed you’re skilled in hand to hand combat and marksmanship. You also seem to have the capacity for operating under stress, and I have your predicted grades for your GCSE’s and your school reports indicating high intelligence. All of these things together mean you already have certain skills we teach, and you can be easily taught the rest required for you to operate in the field. Your age, background and looks also mean no one would think to associate you with The Department making your insertion undercover easier.”

David interrupted again at this point, asking, “What do you mean ‘my looks’?”

The Director smiled slightly as he pondered how exactly to answer this question, but after a moment he said, “You have a very common physiological type and you don’t have any very distinctive features. That means it would be relatively easy for you to enter and exit people’s lives without being remembered. Let me put it this way, if you were in a crowd, no one would look twice at you, and on an operation that could be a very useful advantage.”

For a moment there was complete silence in the office as the Director waited for an answer and David tried to see another way out open to him, one that preferably didn’t lead to employment or prison. Several seconds passed before the standoff ended and eventually David, knowing he didn’t really have a choice said, “Fine I’m in. It’s not like I have a choice is it?”

The Director smiled broadly as he heard David’s answer, saying only, “Excellent, happy to have you on board. I’ll have a car take you home and we’ll be in touch shortly to make arrangements for testing to assess your abilities. In the mean time get some rest and continue to live your life as normal.”

With that the oddest job interview David could ever have imagined was over and he got out of the chair, turned and left the office. Outside the agent from the hotel was still waiting and proceeded to escort him back down to the garage and a waiting black car that whisked him back to his room to collect his things and then on to his house. The car left him at the front door, leaving him to go in alone.

Chapter 10

Looking back on it all, David couldn’t be certain that all of his training, all of his hobbies hadn’t been part of a wider scheme for him to eventually join The Department. In fact it seemed very likely considering how his father had encouraged him to get involved with most of them. All he did know was that any plans his parents had made before that day were certainly void by now. Life had taken him in a particular direction and all he could do was make the best of things.

The sudden ringing of the doorbell broke his reminiscence and he slowly got off the sofa, grabbed the money for the takeaway from the coffee table and opened the front door to reveal the usual delivery man holding the normal brown paper bag. After a short conversation with the driver, he paid, receiving the brown paper bag in return. Then the delivery driver got back in his car and headed off, leaving David on the doorstep with his meal.

Once back inside he sat back down and began to eat, turning the TV over to a film that had just started. As he ate, and watched, he pondered what to do tomorrow. He knew he should get to work reading up on the law information, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it and instead decided to stock the pantry and sort out any other odd jobs that needed doing around the house. Not long after deciding this, he finished his curry and rather than finish his film, opted instead to go upstairs and get some sleep. With this uppermost in his mind, he switched off the TV and the lights and went upstairs, passing the master bedroom by, even now he thought of it as his parent’s bedroom, and walked into his old room instead.

For a short moment he looked around his room, reacquainting himself with the sights. Things had certainly changed since he’d begun living on his own. The walls had been repainted and were now indigo, and he’d gotten himself a new double bed. There was also a TV stood on top of a small chest of drawers, also new, stood at the end of the bed. There were also several other bits of new furniture including a wardrobe. Yet it was still unmistakeably the room he’d grown up in and that familiarity had often been a comfort to him. Then he cleared his mind, changed into a set of pyjamas he’d not bothered to take to university and got into bed, falling asleep not long after.

That night his mind continued to dredge up details of his history with The Department, it was almost as if it was rerunning his entire history with the organisation and was showing it to him like a film in the cinema. This time he remembered the ways he’d been tested and trained for his new position. He’d first been sent to a training facility in London where the curriculum had focused on espionage techniques and investigation. It had been a trying time, not least because he had been missing school every day and yet he still had to spend every spare moment preparing for his fast approaching GCSE’s.

Yet in spite of the massive disruption caused by his training, he’d managed to get through his GCSE’s fine and by the end he was even feeling tentatively confident about his results. Once they were finished he was forced to dedicate more and more time to his studies at the training facility where his training regime was intensified. It was as if the Director wanted his new asset up to speed as soon as possible.

In the end he’d spent nearly ten weeks at the London facility, during which time he officially finished his school year and began his summer holiday. Finally though, only a week after his holiday had officially started, they declared him fit for duty and he’d then been quickly sent to Hereford, where the SAS were tasked with assessing his physical capabilities. Overnight his routine changed from electronic surveillance techniques and tailing targets to marching all day and hours at a time spent practicing and showing off every technique he knew for killing people.

In all he spent eight weeks at Hereford before he was sent back to London, just before the Troopers he trained with went off to do their jungle training. The Regiment had said there was nothing more they could teach him that would help him in working for The Department when they packed him off. Then back in London, he’d been left to his own devices for a week before being finally called back to the Director’s office, and being given his first mission.

The morning of that day he’d been woken up by the sound of the doorbell and had hurriedly gotten out of bed and gone downstairs to find a suited man waiting for him. The man could only have been an agent from The Department and as David looked at him, he saw another agent in a suit waiting patiently in an idling black saloon sat on the driveway. Neither the sixteen year old boy nor the agent needed to say anything; the two just shared a look, and that was all David needed. He hurried back inside, took a very quick shower and then dressed. Five minutes later he was back outside and sat in the back of the car as it headed down the M11 towards London.

The routine was the same as before and he was guided straight to the Director’s office where nothing seemed to have changed since he’d had been there last. The man himself was sat in exactly the same position; there was still a stack of paperwork next to him. The only difference was the fire was no longer burning merrily to one side and since his last time there the season had changed from a cold spring to summer. In turn, David found himself being closely examined by the Director, who was trying to reconcile the seemingly innocent sixteen year old stood in front of him with the reports he’d received from the instructors.

David Ryder, it seemed, was exceptional by any standards. He’d scored perfectly in all combat related fields that he’d been tested on at Hereford and in the ninety fifth percentile for his espionage training conducted at the London facility. Despite all this however, no one looking at the five foot ten, sixteen year old with brown hair and hazel eyes, would ever suspect he belonged to a top secret unit tasked with resolving the most sensitive issues and threats to the country.

The Director broke the silence first, speaking softly in an almost admiring tone of voice, “Well I’ve had the reports from your instructors. It seems you’ve passed every test with flying colours. In fact based on your scores you’re one of the most promising recruits we’ve ever accepted into The Department. So with your ability proved beyond all doubt, I’m happy to formally accept you as a full field agent. Do you have anything to say?”

As the Director finished, David looked at him as if to say, ‘what do you expect me to say after you blackmailed me into working for you.’ Out loud he just said, “Thank you Sir.”

At this the Director smiled, happy at least that David wouldn’t be making things more difficult than they might already be. With the initial catch up over, the older man looked again at the file in front of him, the real reason for him calling David into his office that morning. “I have a mission for you,” he said, noting the immediate interest in the younger man’s face. It seemed David hadn’t thought that he was going to be put to work quite so soon.

Before there could be an interruption though, the Director continued to speak, saying, “It’s something I think only you can resolve and it offers a perfect opportunity to get some experience. Take this file, read it and then you can ask any questions you have. Afterwards I’ll send you to your handler who’ll be available to answer any further, mission specific questions you may have as well as discussing your exact role in more detail.”

With that the Director leant across the desk, the black file clasped in his hand and he offered it to David, who looked at it for a moment before finally taking it and pulling the file into his lap. The first thing he saw as he opened the file were several pictures of bodies and quickly he felt the full weight of his new job on his shoulder. Then as he read on he saw that these were people killed by an organised crime group in a recent spate of attacks.

At first none of it seemed to have anything to do with The Department, which he knew concerned itself mainly with incredibly sensitive or dangerous threats to national security. But as he read on, he saw the reason for the organisation involving itself with the activities of the crime group. The group detailed in the file had ties to arms and drug dealing around the world, ties that had only been recently discovered. What’s more those ties had in turn led to connections with several different terrorist organisations and drug cartels. The gang was therefore acting as a source of revenue and supplies for these groups and The Department was now stepping in to take them out.

He continued reading for another twenty minutes, carefully examining every detail of the file he’d been given, before finally looking up at the Director, who was looking at him. Speaking softly, he asked the only question that had occurred to him while reading the file. “Seeing as you know so much about these guys, why don’t you arrest them and deal with them that way?”

The Director laughed at that, before giving David his answer, with a smile still on his lips. “My dear boy, if we are examining a situation, the time has often been and gone for such conventional solutions.” He explained, it was something that the new agent had been told often during his training, but he hadn’t actually considered the true implications of those words before. “The police and MI5 have been tracking this gang for months, years even and they have gotten a lot of usable intelligence but they have nothing that could put away the leaders of this group. Now we’ve become involved because intelligence has come to light regarding links to terrorism. So conventional outfits are out of the question and so are conventional solutions. Now we are involved there is only one endgame. To permanently put these men out of commission by whatever means necessary.”

David thought for a moment, before nodding slowly. It made sense that if these men couldn’t be tried by conventional means then The Department should use unconventional ones to deal with them. Then he nodded more confidently, surer of his the validity of this approach, and stood up saying, “Well that’s all I was wondering, I’ll point any other questions to the mission controller, this Agent Stirling? Where can I find him?”

The Director nodded in understanding, a smile on his face and yet he noted a hint of reluctance in David’s voice, something that suggested he still wasn’t happy with the situation. Then he nodded towards the door and said, “Stirling is one of our best young agents, he’ll be waiting for you in the lobby. He put together the file you just read so he can answer any further questions that occur to you. In the meantime be careful and be professional, one thing I hate is writing obituaries for dead agents.”

David managed smiled at that, and it felt like it’d been years since his lips had formed that shape. Then he said, “Well fortunately the circumstances of my recruitment mean there’s nobody left to care what my obituary says, so you needn’t bother in the event.” Once again there was a note of harshness in David’s voice that hinted that he was just hiding his annoyance at having to work for The Department against his will. It was more than that though, the Director realised the harshness in the young man’s could equally be because he truly believed there was no one left who’d bother to read his obituary. Then David got up and left the office, taking the lift back down to the lobby.

Once the lift arrived in the lobby, he stepped out and immediately scanned the area, looking intently for Agent Stirling. There was a problem however in that he’d never been introduced to the man and he’d never seen a picture of him. Fortunately his problems were dealt with when a man, with blue eyes that were shining with recognition, walked up to him and held out his hand.

“Are you Ryder?” he asked, as David took his hand.

“I am, are you Stirling?” David replied.

Agent Stirling laughed at that, before saying; “The name’s Jack, follow me mate, I’ll show you to your office and we can then discuss the mission. That alright with you?”

He had then set off towards the lifts, David following in tow. There was a steady stream of conversation between the two as both tried to learn about the basics about the other as quickly as possible. Although for Stirling it was more a case of matching what he’d read in David’s file to what the young man was saying.For David though all the information he was receiving was brand new and he took great delight in questioning his new acquaintance in depth.

By the time they’d arrived at the fourth floor in the lift, he had learned that Jack was twenty eight, had been born up North and had been headhunted by The Department while in his final year at Durham University. He’d been working for The Department for seven years and had already been involved in dozens of operations.

Once they were out of the lift on the correct floor, David had first been taken to see his office, which only contained the basic furniture at that point and nothing in the way of personal details or creature comforts. They had even put his name on the door. Jack had then decided to take his young charge to his own office, where he hoped they’d be more comfortable and David would feel more at ease.

Jack’s office was broadly the similar to David’s, if a little larger because of the older man’s seniority. The difference though was that Jack’s office had two comfortable chairs in one corner with a coffee table between them, and on the shelves at the back he had installed a mini fridge. Pointing David to one of the comfy chairs in the corner, Jack had gotten them both a can of coke from the mini fridge and then they’d gotten down to work.

First they discussed the mission background as Jack wanted to ensure David understood the objectives and suspects. From there the conversation had moved onto how David would be implanted with the group and what he’d be expected to do.

Two hours later and the two of them had gone over the plan in detail, including exactly how David was going to be introduced into the group and what he’d be doing to gather intelligence once undercover. The plan sounded solid to him as the more experienced agent went through everything and he’d never have guessed how fragile it would turn out to be. Even the best laid plans had a greater than average chance of failure when confronted with an actual situation, that mission had taught him that. In fact both of them would be taught that lesson when the mission started, and then almost instantly became derailed.

Chapter 11

Things had started off well. David had successfully settled into his cover and had steadily ingratiating himself with the lower levels of the criminal group’s hierarchy. Then the time had come to meet one of the bosses, who’d tested him with a couple of simple courier jobs. He’d passed with flying colours and had been quickly inducted into the group. However at that moment things had changed.

He only had a couple of days of gathering intelligence in London though, and only some of that had been useful. In such a short period of time he was only able to identify a couple of the high ranking individuals he’d been sent to find. As for details of the gangs operations, he only saw the lowest risk activities and there was nothing about the terrorist links that he’d been sent to dig up. In spite of that though he’d been doing a good job and had steadily worked his way into the good books of his superiors, and even managed to catch the eye of one of the men running the entire group.

That was when things started to go wrong though and one morning two weeks after going undercover he was given instructions to catch a flight to the Middle East. Apparently the purpose had been a ‘business’ trip, but when he landed he discovered that it was actually a front for him helping out at a training camp in the middle of the desert. So now he was in the middle of nowhere, no one knew where he was, he had no support and he was surrounded by terrorists in training, men he was supposed to train to kill. In the end he spent two weeks at the camp, providing terrorist recruits with weapons and explosives training.

In that time he met Katya, an attractive Russian woman from Moscow who’d been working for the group for several months. Eventually she’d been brought out to the camp to help set up cover identities, one of her specialties being forged documents. On the fourteenth day though the situation had changed dramatically, David had been doing shooting drills with half a dozen of the recruits when he’d heard the commotion. Turning around he’d seen Katya being held between two men while the camp’s commander screamed at her in Arabic. Languages had never been his forte and beyond basic niceties he couldn’t speak or understand a word of what was being said. He didn’t need to though; the other man’s tone of voice and red face told him all he needed to know.

Later he asked one of the men who he’d become friendly with, and spoke good English, what had happened. The answer had surprised him to say the least. It had turned out that Katya was Russian military intelligence, one of the group’s informers in Moscow had heard from a friend in military intelligence about the operation. The man had been drunk at the time and after only a little coaxing he’d given up Katya’s undercover identity and had told the informer everything.

As David had questioned his friend further, he was told that Katya was going to be executed as a message to the Russians, and the camp was going to be moved to make sure it remained undetected. Just like that the camp and its recruits would disappear into the wastelands of the desert and he would lose his chance to make the mission a success, plus there’d be a dead woman on his hands, something that to him would be unacceptable.

So later that evening, he decided there was only one thing he could do, but he had to act that night. Katya wasn’t going to be killed until the morning and that presented him with a very small window of opportunity. He decided to launch a rescue and get her out, while at the same time dealing with the camp before it could disappear and continue to churn out more terrorists.

So that night, when his watch told him it was midnight and even the sentries would be sleepy, he slipped out his tent crept through the camp. His first task was the silence the sentries which he did ruthlessly, silently killing them one by one using a KA-BAR US military fighting knife. It was seven inches of steel and silent killing and it did its job perfectly. Four times he clamped a hand around another man’s mouth, stifling the inevitable cry as he plunged the blade into either the neck or the chest. All told it took less than half an hour for him to deal with the four sentries posted around the camp. After concealing the bodies beneath sand, he headed back into the camp and made his way to a hut to one side where Katya was being held.

As he approached, the guard on duty had been suspicious. It was late, so late that no one should be moving around the camp, and he’d been told to allow no one to get close to the prisoner. Despite David’s suspicious behaviour though guard hadn’t bothered to even raise his AK, likely helped by the easy smile David had put on and his raised hands, showing no weapons in either. That was the last mistake the guard had made. Once he was within range his hand had lashed out, the knuckles crushing the guard’s windpipe. As the blow landed, the man collapsed to the floor, unable to breath and for a moment David was tempted to put him out of his misery using his knife. He knew he didn’t have the time though and instead opened the hut and untied Katya, who was beaten and bound but not seriously injured.

From there he had led her to the motor pool and had pushed her into the nearest land rover, an ancient vehicle that had clearly spent many years being mistreated in the desert. He knew it still ran fine though and with her inside, he climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. This was stealth had to give way to speed, the engine was not quiet and as soon as he touched the accelerator it roared loudly. Knowing that would quickly have everyone in the camp awake, he pushed the pedal on the right to the floor and sped out of the camp, making it to the edge before any of the other occupants were awake enough to compute what was happening. There was another reason for his speed however, and he’d only just gotten clear of the camp before the entire thing went up in smoke as several C4 charges he’d placed around camp exploded in unison.

They had then driven in silence for two hours until he was satisfied that there was no pursuit from any surviving terrorists and pulled over. It was only then that the silence was broken as he addressed his silent passenger. “Are you hurt?” The question seemed unnaturally loud in the vast silence of the desert and the car.

Several moments passed before he received any kind of answer to his question, as Katya turned to him and simply shook her head, her lips tightly closed in a clear sign that she wasn’t saying anything to him. Refusing to be put off however, he smiled encouragingly before saying, “I have to report in with my superiors, just stay here, I’ll only be gone a few minutes.”

Then he opened his door, took out his phone and dialled Jack’s number as he stepped out into the cold desert air. He’d just gotten through to Jack and had heard, “Ryder, where the hell are you?” when suddenly David sensed, rather than heard, movement behind him and found himself tackled to the sand without warning.

Rolling over, he then found himself staring at the cold, hard barrel of the Browning he’d armed himself with earlier that evening, just in case. Then he looked past the cold, steel muzzle of the pistol to see who was wielding it, he was confronted with Katya’s face, looking very angry and very dangerous staring down at him.

The two of them had stared at each other for a moment, saying nothing and yet speaking volumes with their eyes. He maintained a calm gaze, intended to show he meant her no harm, meanwhile the angry glare she was wearing told him that she didn’t believe or trust him.

A couple more minutes passed then before David finally decided to break the silence and try to defuse the situation, partly because the pistol aimed at his head was shaking slightly and he didn’t want to be shot accidentally. “Can I get up now, please?” he asked, keeping his hands out to the side with palms facing up and trying to use as calming a tone of voice as possible.

In answer she stepped back two steps, taking her out of arm reach once he was on his feet, and nodded, keeping the Browning trained on him the entire time. He meanwhile got up from the sand slowly, keeping his hands up to clearly show he wasn’t armed and meant no threat, although when he was on his feet he did take a moment to brush himself down. Once again silence eclipsed the situation before she said, “Who the hell are you and why have you kidnapped me?”

David laughed briefly at that, wondering how to answer the woman pointing a pistol at his head. When briefed for the mission he’d been told that no one was to know his true identity and he should only use his cover persona, and to be honest it was just common sense that he not give up his true identity. However things had now changed and he knew that to lie now might get him shot.

With all of this running through his mind at breakneck speed, he finally decided that the truth was the only way to answer Katya’s question, or at least part of the truth, and said, “My name is David Ryder. I’m a mole in the criminal group you’ve been investigating on behalf of British Intelligence. Also I wasn’t kidnapping you, I was saving you. I’d have thought you’d view this situation as an improvement over the prospect of being executed.”

As he spoke, Katya’s expression went from confused and hostile to disbelieving and she couldn’t help but laugh and say, “You’re working for British intelligence? That’s ridiculous, how old are you? Seventeen; eighteen!”

David smiled in return before breaking the silence once again, “I’m sixteen, and apparently that’s why I’m useful. Anyway can I now put my hands down now, I think it’s clear that I mean you no harm.”

She nodded and lowered the pistol and a moment later he followed suit with his hands, smiling encouragingly as he did so. Then his attention turned to the phone lying nearby in the sand and he realised Jack would be wondering what the hell was going on. “Can I talk to my mission controller; he’ll be wondering what’s happened to me?”

As David asked this, he knelt down and picked up the phone, then looked to Katya for permission. She gave it with a simple nod and as soon as it was given, he put the phone to his ear to hear Jack frantically asking “David, are you there? What’s going on?”

“Jack, I’m here. There’s been a slight misunderstanding with a passenger.”

As Jack spoke again, David heard the note of relief in his voice, before concentrating on exactly what he was saying. “What’s happening? You disappeared off the grid two weeks ago and we haven’t even been able to get a signal from your Sat-Phone. Where the hell are you?”

For a moment David smiled sheepishly, even though Jack couldn’t see him. He hadn’t had a chance to update his superior before getting onto the plane and once he’d arrived he couldn’t use his satellite phone for fear he was discovered. Instead he’d kept it safely hidden at the very bottom of his bag, wrapped in a T-shirt. Still Jack deserved an answer so David told him the truth, saying, “I’m somewhere in the Middle Eastern desert, I don’t know where exactly. I’ve been on lockdown in a terrorist training camp for the last two weeks, you can find it if you turn your satellites to view an area around forty miles east of my current location.”

When Jack next spoke the relief was still in his voice as he said, “Thank god, I was worried we’d lost you. Now what’s this about a passenger?”

“One of the people in the camp turned out to be Russian Intelligence, her cover was blown and they were going to kill her. I decided to grant her a reprieve, and also liberally applied plastic explosive around the camp to make sure there was no chance of pursuit, and to stop it disappearing. I figure if I head west I’ll make the coast sometime, can you give me the location of the closest airfield?”

Jack was silent for a short moment after that before saying, with a pleased note to his voice, “Well it sounds like you’ve been having some fun out there. It’s good you destroyed the camp and we’ll get some thanks from the Russians for saving their agent, so everything’s turned out fine. From the signal from your phone, it looks like you’re in Yemen at the moment; the closest airport to you from there is Seiyun. It’s about a hundred kilometres south of you. I’ll have a Department plane head there to meet you tomorrow; keep your phone on so I can pinpoint your location. Good luck.”

Smiling David just said “See you soon Stirling,” and ended the call. Turning back to Katya, he said, “There’ll be a plane waiting for us at Seiyun airport, it’s about a hundred kilometres away. It’ll take us back to the UK and from there we’ll make arrangements to get you home.” She smiled at that, the first time she had done so in since he’d met her and it completely changed her face from a closed off cold demeanour to a warm open, friendly one.

Smiling back, David motioned for them to return to the Land Rover and once they were back inside and sat down, he turned the key and the engine roared back into life. It would take at least a full day to arrive at the airport, considering the loose conditions and the battered and aged nature of the car which would blunt how quickly it could travel. Considering all of that he reckoned that the sensible speed would be to cruise at twenty to thirty miles an hour, and hope that the car proved reliable and the terrain didn’t become any harder to drive across.

The hundred kilometre drive took exactly what David judged it would do in the end and after a day’s driving, partly over loose sand and partly of the tarmac roads that appeared as they got closer to their destination, he and Katya became firm friends. By the time they came into view of Seiyun, David knew almost everything there was to know about Katya and she in turn had heard most of his own life story, carefully censored to fit in with what he’d already told her. Eventually though they made it to the airport and were met outside by Jack, smiling broadly and greeting David with a bear hug, before then introducing himself to Katya like a perfect gentleman. Abandoning the Land Rover in the car park, he led the pair straight through security, waving some kind of ID that got them passed straight through without having to present any documentation. Then they were back outside on the other side and walking across the runway towards the white jet sitting there waiting for them.

As they walked Jack said, “We sent a cleanup crew to the camp by the way, to check out the mess. From their report you left nothing standing and from the lack of tracks in the sand it looked like you got all the occupants as well. Apparently it was the closest thing to full destruction they’d ever seen. It was a slight shame we couldn’t learn anymore before you had to blow everything up but it’s still a win for us.”

David smiled at that and answered, “Well I thought it was time we got something right.”

Jack’s smile broadened at that and he then turned to Katya and said, “I’ve been in contact with your superiors and of course they are very eager to have you back. The plane will take us the Britain first and I believe you’ll then be picked up by someone from the embassy before they arrange transportation back to Moscow. Now let’s got out of here and go home.”

“I agree, I’m sick to death of this endless sand,” David said, as beside him Katya nodded in agreement. Jack laughed at that as they finally stopped in front of the steps leading up to the aircraft. Both of the men stepped back then, allowing Katya to go first with David following close behind and Jack coming up last. The door was then closed almost immediately, and the plane promptly began to taxi for takeoff as its passengers seated themselves and prepared for the long flight home.

Chapter 12

Three years later, David surfaced from his memories and it took him a moment before he realised where he was. For a split second he’d imagined he was back in the desert, sixteen years old and surrounded by terrorists who would have killed him if they’d known who he really was. Then he realised that it was morning and a glance at the watch sitting on his bedside table confirmed it was eight o’clock. Not that he needed it, a glimmer of sunshine streaming through a gap in the curtains was the only clue he needed. Tempted for a moment to just lie there and waste the day away, boredom eventually made him give up.

Literally rolling out of bed, he wandered through to the bathroom and got into the shower, allowing the heated water to finish the job of waking him up that had been started by the sun. Then he dressed into his usual jeans and T-shirt and headed downstairs. He knew he couldn’t have breakfast and there was nothing in the kitchen so instead he went straight down to the garage and into the Aston. His first job was to drive into town, he desperately needed food.

An hour later though and the Aston rolled back into the garage, laden with food for the pantry. David had been quick and efficient, stocking up on a week’s worth of food in record time, but then he never had been one to browse in shops, instead he went in, got what he needed and got out, all as quickly as possible. Once the car was stopped, he applied similar energy and efficiency to getting the shopping into the kitchen and then put away into the appropriate cupboards. It didn’t take long as he didn’t normally eat too much anyway.

That task completed, he moved on to other general tasks that needed doing around the house. Since he’d left a very fine layer of dust had settled over many surfaces so he seized a can of polish and moved through the house cleaning every surface. If his friends could have seen him then, they would likely have been shocked but since having to fend for himself he’d become quite the domestic goddess.

After another hour, he had finished all his household tasks and decided it was time to get down to work. He made his way into the study, sat down at the large antique desk and turned on the computer. Having gone through the start up procedure, he plugged in the USB he’d been given the day before and opened up the files, deciding to finish going through the files on the London Stock Exchange first before moving onto the law files.

He worked for three hours solid during the rest of that morning, not taking a single break as he assimilated every scrap of information possible from the files he’d been given. The London Stock Exchange files were done with pretty quickly and they were as he expected, mainly a mixture of building, floor and office layout plans and personnel rosters.

With two of the three folders finished, he moved on to the law information he’d been provided with. Most of the information proved to be large sections copied from law textbooks, which were rather dull but the information would be invaluable when he was undercover. Eventually though the morning was finished and he’d had enough of looking at a screen. Deciding he needed a break, he first headed to the kitchen and made himself a sandwich, and as he ate it he decided to get out of the house for a bit. On a whim he decided to head to headquarters, he could sort out his refresher course and get some exercise at the gym while he was there. Decided on his plan he quickly packed a bag with sports clothing and got into the Aston and set off for London.

An hour and a half later and he pulled into the underground garage. Getting out, he grabbed his bag off the passenger seat and, instead of taking the elevator up, went to the second basement floor where the gym was located. Stepping into the cold room, made so by the air conditioning, he found himself in a large room, filled with various machines and even a boxing ring at the far end. It was also empty, not terribly unusual but still a bit of a surprise.

David had to change first though and walked to the far side of the room where the changing rooms were located. Inside he was greeted by a spartan scene of tiles, wooden benches and metal lockers, exactly the same as any changing room in any gym around the world. Dropping his bag onto the nearest bench, he quickly stripped of his jeans a T-shirt, replacing them with a pair of shorts and a sports shirt. Then he walked back through into the gym and got to work.

First he got onto the treadmill and after sorting the music on his I-phone out, set a brisk pace on the computer and began to run off his boredom. As he ran, with music blaring in his ears, he went over what he’d read earlier in the morning. He recalled everything he could about the cases, precedents and legal rules that he needed to learn as part of his cover. Part of the problem was that when he was in the Stock Exchange he would actually have to work during the days, and that meant he had to be both competent and convincing in his role.

After twenty minutes on the treadmill, he got off and moved onto the nearest rowing machine which he set for two kilometres and got going. With his music still blaring in his ears David quickly got into a rhythm and before long the metres were tumbling away with every stroke. He was so intent on his rhythm he didn’t realise he wasn’t alone until a hand very suddenly appeared on his shoulder and gave him one of the biggest frights of his life.

Quickly getting up and taking his earphones out all in one movement, he turned to see Mary standing there with a big grin on her face with her long dark brown hair tied up in a ponytail. Smiling back, he spoke first. “Jesus you gave me a fright Mary. Was there no other way you could have gotten my attention? Preferably one that didn’t give me a heart attack.”

She just laughed as he said this, her laughter echoing around the otherwise empty gym, before finally answering David. “Well I did shout at you, but you were in your own little world and didn’t seem to hear me. Anyway what’re you doing here today? I thought you were going to spend a few days at home and go through all the mission prep there before coming back into the office to discuss the plan with Jack and myself.”

“I got bored,” David answered, “so I decided to exercise the boredom out of me. I also need to get myself booked in for a refresher course with the quartermaster. I figured I’d do that while I was here and do a bit more work in my office before going home later. But the question is now, what are you doing here?”

“Well I got bored as well and figured I could do with a break. That and I heard someone say your Aston had entered the garage. I’ve already checked your office and saw you weren’t there so I guessed that you’d be here and I wondered what you were doing here so I came down. Is that alright with you?” As she spoke, Mary out her hands on her hips.

David said, “Course that’s alright, in fact seeing as you’re here, fancy a turn in the ring?” answered her rhetorical question with a smile on his face.

Mary nodded and crossed the room to the boxing ring at the other end, David following on behind. They both donned gloves that were sitting on a rack next to the side of the ring and then stepped over the ropes and into the ring. These were martial arts gloves though rather than boxing gloves.

As they did so he remembered the first time they’d met which had been in this very ring. He’d been in the room when a group of recruits had been brought in to test their hand to hand combat nearly two and a half years ago. The instructor, seeing him there, had appropriated him to help test them. Out of the group Mary had been the only one to seriously challenge him during their bout, although he’d eventually gotten the upper hand and won.

Then his thoughts were brought back to the present as she said, “You alright there David? I was just saying I’m ready when you are.”

He smiled in response before raising his gloves and stepping forwards into the centre of the ring as she did the same. For a moment neither of them moved, they just stood there, staring at each other and waiting for the other to make the first move. Eventually Mary’s patience ran thin and she moved in quickly, beginning the bout in earnest.

David avoided the first two attacks with ease, allowing them to go either side of him, before grabbing Mary’s wrist as the heel of her right palm shot forward towards his face for her third attack. Realising she was in trouble, she sent her left fist slamming into his stomach. Taking the blow, David flipped her neatly over his shoulder and onto the mat of the boxing ring, pinning her there with his weight and using his knees to immobilise her arms.

“I think I win this round Mary,” he couldn’t help but remark. After a few moments to make sure she accepted the loss, he released her and the two once again squared off for round two.

This time Mary’s patience held and it fell to him to make the first move. Moving forwards quickly he threw two rapid punches aimed at her body. They were blows designed to knock the wind out of her, or they would have done if they’d landed but she stepped to his right and avoided both.

As his momentum forced him past her; she laid two rapid blows into his abdomen leaving him doubled up and winded. Following up she then swept his feet from under him, dropping him to the mat. Before he could get up, David found Mary’s knees pinning his shoulders to the mat, immobilising him completely. Smiling she said, “I think that’s one all, deciding round?”

Grinning back, he got up and said, “Unless you want to concede now and let me win.”

“Not on your life,” was her reply, before she suddenly rushed towards him, trying to use speed and surprise to win the bout early. He wasn’t easily beaten though and just backed up to put some space in between the two of them, avoiding every blow she sent his way. Once there was some room to manoeuvre however, the two began to circle each other and the bout began in earnest. This third bout went on for much longer than the preceding two, as both combatants exercised more caution in their desire to win the entire match.

The two of them finished up in the centre of the ring, deciding to disregard movement for power as they tried to wear each other down with a punishing and constant rain of blows. David took the first hit as Mary sent a flurry of blows into his stomach and chest, which knocked the wind out of him. He retaliated with a hard punch into her own abdomen and followed up by sweeping her legs out from under her, sending her down to the mat. Before he could capitalise on the situation however she kicked his own legs from under him and as he fell to the mat, she locked her legs around his neck while pinning his arm to maintain control.

As she slowly tightened her grip on his neck, trying to force him to submit and at the same time choking him, David, beginning to go slightly faint from a lack of oxygen, exploited an opening and flipped himself onto his front, taking Mary by surprise, loosening her grip on his neck and putting her under him. Using his right arm to fight himself free of Mary’s legs, he quickly got to his feet and turned to face his opponent, who was also standing, ready for his next move.

Instead he stood off for a moment, trying to get his breath back after Mary had half choked him. Seeing his predicament as an advantage she quickly moved forward and swung her fist towards his body, trying to stop him get any air into his lungs and winding him again. He saw the move coming however and blocked it with his forearm, then as her momentum brought her crashing against his body; he fell backwards bringing her back to the ground with him.

As they hit the mat, he grabbed her wrists and rolled over, pinning her under him. Even as he did so, she managed to free her right wrist and grabbed him round the throat. For a moment neither of them moved, but then in between deep breaths Mary said, “Shall we call that one a draw?”

Unable to speak by virtue of the hand gripping his throat, David could only nod, and released his grip on her other wrist while she released her grip on his throat. As they both regained their feet and got their breath back, he finally managed to force some words out of his bruised throat, “Nice one, next time though could you not half kill me?”

She laughed at that, saying, “I’ll try,” before stepping out of the ring and walking back to the changing rooms. As she went, she called back over her shoulder, “I think that’s enough exercise for me for the time being, I’m going to head back to the office. Feel free to pop your head round the door if you have any questions about the mission. I’ll see you soon?”

David simply nodded as he leaned heavily against the ropes of the ring. “Definitely, I’ll definitely pop my head round the door before I go tonight. I’d better go and see the quartermaster now.”

With that she walked into the changing rooms, while he left the gym and went to the third underground floor, still in his sweaty clothes. The quartermaster had his office here and it was also where the armoury and firing ranges were located.

As he walked out of the elevator, he could hear the faint sounds of gunfire coming from the ranges, positioned in rooms with doors coming off left and right from the corridor he was standing in. Heading down the corridor, he went right to the end, stopping in front of the last door which had a brass plaque on it saying “Quartermaster”. Knocking on the door, he waited for the normal reply of, “Come in.”

Opening the door, David walked in to see a small office, crammed with files and old targets and occupied by a small middle aged man seated at a desk. Nodding in greeting to the Quartermaster, David said, “Afternoon Tom.”

The quartermaster was an unimpressive figure; there was nothing about him that appeared particularly menacing. David knew though that the man was one of the best marksmen he’d ever met, and a truly deadly individual.

“Ryder, I wasn’t expecting to see you here anytime soon. It’s not like you can really improve on perfection is it?” the man shot back, leaning back in his chair as David took the chair on the other side of the desk. He laughed at the other man’s comment before telling the Quartermaster what he was there for.

“Director’s orders, I’ve got a mission coming up and he wants me up to speed. Apparently this one could present me with an unusual level of danger. So I’ve got to take a refresher course, you know grow reacquainted with firearms and so on just in case things turn south.”

Opening up a large ledger on his desk which contained the calendar for the ranges and when they were booked and by which agents, “Right you are then, everything’s booked solid for the next couple of days I’m afraid, lots of agents are doing their marksmanship requalification. But that said the killing house and range have both got slots free on Friday. Can you make that?”

“That’ll be fine Tom; if you email me the time, I’ll be here. How have things been going here?”

Tom sat back in his chair and soon the two of them were chatting happily about everything going on in The Department from the viewpoint of the Quartermaster’s office. As they talked, Tom found two cokes, alcohol wasn’t permitted on the floor, and the two spent an hour and a half talking. Their conversation eventually moved onto more mundane things when Tom asked how University was going.

After a while though, David decided he needed to get back to work. Having said goodbye, he made his way back to the lifts and went back to the gym where he showered and changed. He then took the lift up to the fourth floor and made his way to his office where, just as he’d done in his house’s office that morning. Sitting at the desk he turned the computer on and plugged in the USB to read more about the law he might be expected to know as part of his cover.

Chapter 13

 David ended up working for two hours solid before; mercifully, he was interrupted by a sudden appearance from Mary knocking on the door to his office and poking her head round the glass. “Hey, how are you getting on?”

“Good thanks. I’m getting through it at least but I am deathly bored, you haven’t by any chance come to save me from this reading have you?” he answered, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands behind his head, smiling the entire time.

She laughed at that heartily as she stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame completely relaxed while he looked hopefully at her from behind the desk. “Depends, if I have come to save you does that square everything up?”

David appeared to think about it for a moment before saying, “God yes, we’d be even.”

She laughed again at that, “Come with me then and let’s get you out of here,” before grabbing him by the hand, pulling him out of his chair and then propelling him out the door and into the corridor. Once there he paused for a moment to lock the door to his office before allowing Mary to pull him away. As they walked along the corridor, the two maintained a lively conversation.

“I’ve always meant to ask, why do you always lock your office when you leave it?” Mary asked as they walked through the maze of corridors that made up the fourth floor, although at least by now David could tell where he was being taken. He recognised the route as heading for Mary’s office.

He smiled at her question, glanced sideways at her and answered, “I like my privacy, and this is a spy organisation. I don’t necessarily trust everyone here enough to leave them with an open invitation to snoop.”

She nodded sympathetically at that, “I can understand that, especially as you’ve got more reason than most to want to maintain your privacy. The rest of us don’t have a separate life waiting for us after missions in the same way.”

After a short moment of silence David then asked, “So I take it you’re taking me to your office, but the question is why?”

“Well, I thought about taking you to the canteen and getting a meal, but then I thought it would be far more useful for us to sit down and discuss the mission. From what I gather you need to be up to speed as quickly as possible,” she answered with a smile on her face as she saw David’s face fall slightly.

He then shrugged it off and laughed before saying, “and here I was thinking you’d come to take me away from work completely.”

She laughed in turn and replied “You were the one who decided to come into the office today, you’ve only yourself to blame here.”

“I suppose,” David conceded, his tone taking on a jokingly petulant note to it. By this point in the conversation they’d arrived at a glass door, this one with the name “M. Hall” on it.

Opening the door, they both stepped inside, allowing the door to close behind them, and settled into two comfortable chairs on the right side of the room. As he got comfortable, Mary opened a mini fridge on top of a filing cabinet behind her desk. Grabbing two cans of coke, she sat in the other chair and handed one can to David who happily opened it and began to drink.

For a moment the two of them drank in silence before Mary finally broke the silence once again. “You know our earlier conversation; it took me back to that day we first worked together. Do you remember?”

“How could I forget?” David replied, his mind taking him back to that day two and a half years ago when he’d first worked with her.

Chapter 14

He’d only just finished his first mission and had bidden farewell to Katya, who’d gone back to Russia the days after they’d made it back to the UK. A call had come through asking him to come into headquarters and when he’d arrived he’d been confronted with an office in disarray. It wasn’t long before he was read into the problem. A mission had gone badly wrong, the entire team had been taken hostage inside their safe house and the men behind it were a branch of the same criminal group he’d been investigating.

After being told of the situation, he’d been given a job. He was to go in, using his established cover, eliminate the opposition and free the hostages. He was also told to follow up anything leading to the higher ranks of the group. The Department had decided to take the group apart completely now.

At first he had thought he was being messed with, the mission sounded like pure suicide. But after being assured by the senior agent that it was deadly serious, he’d taken a trip down to see the quartermaster.

Discussing with Tom the task he was faced with, he’d came to the conclusion that it would be no use trying to charge in all guns blazing. That would just get himself, and the hostages, killed. Instead stealth and subtlety would serve him better.

With that in mind David decided to go armed with something small and easily concealed. It would give him the element of surprise, and that would be his greatest weapon. In the end he chose a Walther PPK with a silencer, it may be a sixty year old design but it had been updated several times, and it was still an excellent weapon. He was also making a conscious joke by emulating the most famous of all spies, James Bond.

Suitably armed, he’d checked out an inconspicuous Ford hatchback, and set off towards the safe house which was nearly on the other side of London. As he drove, he kept in contact with the mission controllers back at Headquarters. They provided him with all kinds of information about the layout of the house and what they knew about the opposition, which was precious little.

An hour or so later he pulled up on a street on the other side of London. He was now a couple of streets away from the safe house and as he sat there he took the Walther from the glove compartment and concealed it in his waistband in the small of his back. It was the easiest place to hide a weapon and yet still get at it quickly.

Then he got out of the car and walked the rest of the way. As he walked, he took a phone out of his pocket, something he’d been given during his own mission and had been left behind when he’d taken the flight to the Middle East. Dialling a number he’d memorised into the keypad and put it to his ear.

After a couple of rings a disgruntled voice on the other end said, “David, is that you? What the hell happened to you? The last we heard the holiday camp in the desert was abandoned and we’ve heard nothing from the other participants.” The man on the other end had been his superior while he was undercover; David didn’t know his name, only the codename the Old Man.

David couldn’t help sport the glimmer of a smile at the code the person on the other end was using when asking where he’d been since the camp in the desert had been destroyed. “I’ve been making my way back. I didn’t want to use my phone in case someone was looking for me and tracked it. I got back into London earlier today and immediately heard something was going on in London. Is it anything I can help with?”

“Well swing by and see,” the voice on the other end said, “I’ll call ahead and get them to let you in; they’ll know you by sight. Once you’re finished there come to the pub, I’ve got a meeting with some other bosses from abroad. I’m sure they’ll want to speak to you.” After saying this, the man on the other end gave David an address, not that he paid attention as he already knew it.

“Okay, see you later,” he said before switching his phone off, just as he rounded the corner onto the safe house’s street. In fact he could see the front door; it was the only black one on the street. He waited on the corner for a couple of minutes, watching the door and the windows above to see whether anyone came or went. After he was sure that the Old Man had made his call and that the occupants would be expecting him, he walked down the street and stopped in front of the black door. Knocking on it gently, he stood there for a moment waiting, while behind it he could hear footsteps coming down the stairs to street level. Then the door swung open inwards and a face emerged out of the blackness and stared at David intently.

“David isn’t it,” the man said, “we just got a call to expect you. Come in.”

“Thanks,” David said, then followed his greeting with “after you mate,” once he was inside, allowing the man to lead the way up the stairs. The house was an upside down with the bedrooms on the ground floor and the kitchen and living room was on the first floor. As they got to the top of the flight, David asked “So where’s everyone else?”

The man laughed, “Where do you think? They’re all in the living room with the hostages, arguing over who gets to have a go with the woman first I reckon.”

Instead of answering, David simply grabbed the man from behind and twisted his head viciously to the side, breaking the neck instantly and silently. Laying the man on the landing floor gently so as not to make a sound, he then moved to the door the sentry had indicated. Without a moment’s hesitation he opened it walking into the living room beyond, and as he walked in, he took immediate stock of the situation.

There were four men in the room, two were armed with Browning Automatic Pistols, one had a double barrelled shotgun and the last clutched an Uzi in his hands. They were arranged in various positions throughout the room. One was leaning against the far wall directly across from the door, one sat on a sofa in the centre of the room. Another sat in an armchair next to the sofa and the fourth was standing next to the window to the left of the door. The hostages, all four of them, were sat, with their hands bound, against the far wall with the eyes of all of the hostage takers fixed firmly on the only woman in the group, which happened to be Mary.

Then David turned his attention from the hostages to one of the men carrying a Browning who was obviously the leader and was talking to him. “So you’re Ryder then. I hear good things about you. We shouldn’t be here long, we’ve questioned these spooks but they’re refusing to say anything so we were just about to get to work on them. Wanna join in?”

David smiled slightly, then shook his head and said only “No thanks, I have a better idea.”

The leader looked slightly confused as he asked, “And what might that be?”

“This,” David answered and he produced the Walther from his waistband. He quickly sighted the man with the shotgun first and putting a round into his head before anyone else in the room could move an inch. As the sound from that first shot echoed around the room, the hostage takers tried to do three things. One was get out of the line of fire, and the others were to shoot David or shoot the hostages.

The man with the Uzi opted for the third option and he was the next to appear in David’s sights. A split second before the man could pull his trigger; David pulled his and sent the man tumbling to the ground with a bullet to the side of the head. Meanwhile the second Browning aimed his pistol at David and fired. The first round passed just in front of David’s face, instantly getting his attention. Reacting instinctively David turned, crouching as he did so, and fired twice towards the man. Both rounds hit him in the chest and sent him slumping to the floor.

As the third hostage taker slumped to the ground, David finally turned his attention to the Leader who’d tried to get out of the line of fire by placing Mary in front of him as a human shield. For a moment nobody in the room moved, as David aimed his Walther at the last hostage taker and he in turn aimed his pistol at Mary’s head. At that moment the hostage taker moved his head slightly and began to say, “Put your weapon down.”

He hadn’t even finished uttering the first syllable before David pulled his trigger. The round from his Walther passed over Mary’s shoulder, hitting the hostage taker in the head and coating the wall behind in a mixture of blood, bone fragments and brain matter. The man immediately fell backwards onto the carpet, the Browning falling out of his limp grasp.

For a moment no one in the room dared breathe, and there was a palpable sense of fear from the hostages who wondered what David was going to do now. That sense of fear grew when he unsheathed a knife concealed in his boot and walked over to Mary who’d fallen to the floor. As he approached, he couldn’t see the fear the rest of the group were exhibiting, instead there was anger and defiance. This rapidly melted away into confusion when he knelt down and sliced through her bindings.

Standing, David freed the other Agents and as they rubbed life back into their wrists, he took his personal phone out and called Headquarters. His mission controller answered immediately and David gave a quick update before telling the senior Agent he was going to meet the organisation’s leadership. After a few words of approval from the senior Agent, David switched off to see the freed hostages all looking at him rather curiously. But then he must have been a strange sight, a sixteen year old carrying a Walther, who’d just killed five men with absolutely no hesitation.

Then Mary stepped forward and said “I remember you, you tested me for my hand to hand combat qualification.”

“You have a good memory Agent Hall,” David said while smiling, “but while I’d love to stay and play catch up I’m afraid I’ve got to get to a meeting so if you’ll excuse me.” As he said this, he turned and made to leave but before he could a hand appeared on his shoulder.

“It’s Mary and wherever you’re off to you could probably use some help and I’m not too shabby in a fight.” Turning he saw she’d armed herself with one of the Brownings and stood there with a fiercely determined look which he knew meant she wasn’t going to be dissuaded from joining him.

“Fine,” he conceded, “But you follow my instructions to the letter when we’re there alright?”

As he said this, he noted a glare of resistance from Mary and realised she wasn’t used to not being in charge. Eventually though she looked away and said only, “Alright,” in answer to his one condition.

Moments later the two were back in David’s hatchback and heading towards a nearby pub which acted as a headquarters for the criminal organisation. For a while there was complete silence but eventually he said, “Okay the place we’re going to is a pub called ‘The Highwayman’. It acts as a headquarters for the English end of the organisation we’ve both been investigating. This afternoon they’re having a meeting for several bosses from different countries. The plan is I’ll deal with the leaders and their bodyguards. You watch my back and deal with anyone who tries to head downstairs. Understood?”

As he spoke, David stole sideways glances at the still silent Mary to ensure she was getting everything he was saying. Eventually any worries about understanding went out of the window as she finally said “Got it.”

With that the car became silent once again as they both prepared themselves for what they were about to do. David found it worryingly easy to slip into a state where he forgot all emotion and simply got on with the job, completely shutting down his moral compass. But he worried whether Mary could do the same. He didn’t know whether she’d done this before and he wasn’t sure if he could count on her to watch his back.

It wasn’t long however before he had to dispel all of his worries and focus his mind on the task ahead of him as they approached “The Highwayman”. Pulling the car up onto the kerb just outside the pub, he switched the engine off and turned to Mary to give her his final instructions. “I’m going to go in first, you follow on in a couple of minutes, I’ll still be in the bar when you walk in. order a drink and when you’ve got it I’ll head to the meeting, you take note of where I go and cover that avenue. If anyone tries to follow when it all kicks off, especially if they have a weapon, then you take them down without hesitation. Okay?”

She nodded once, that was all that was needed, and then he got out and walked into the pub. As he walked in, he looked around the familiar surroundings he was in. There were the booths along the right hand wall, the series of circular tables to the left of the door that went along the entire street wall, and then there was the bar in the back left hand corner of the room. The pub, as normal this time of day was less than half full with most of those in the room probably guards for the place rather than actual customers. Walking up to the bar, he ordered a pint of coke and waited for Mary to appear, which she did less than a minute later.

Just as she joined him and ordered a drink, a door just to the right of the bar opened and a man walked in. He walked straight up to David and said “You’re wanted downstairs, follow me.”

With that David was dragged away, but just before the door closed behind him, he saw Mary had occupied the booth nearest the door, with a clear line of sight covering the door. Then the wooden door closed and he found himself on a set of stairs leading down into a cellar. At the bottom he found himself in a large, well lit room. There was plush green carpet covering the floor, a large dark wood conference table in the middle and several chairs around it, all of them occupied by men of various nationalities dressed in expensive suits. Walking forwards, he made sure to note the locations of all of the guards inside the room, none of whom seemed to have weapons in hands, but all of whom were certainly armed.

At that moment the Old Man stood up and introduced him to the group. But, deciding the element of surprise was necessary, David didn’t even let him finish. Producing his Walther, he shot the Old Man in the chest, leaving him to slump to the ground bleeding from his injury as David transferred his aim to the guard who drew his weapon the quickest. Soon the room was filled with gunfire and the guards’ wild shots were soon heard by everyone a floor above in the bar.

This had the men there producing weapons and rushing towards the door, and Mary produced her Browning. Before her opposition had noticed that she was armed, she’d double tapped three of them in the chest and soon had the rest pinned down, mainly behind the bar as she took cover in her booth. She was under no illusions about her job; it was purely to prevent them from interfering with David downstairs.

Meanwhile downstairs David had dealt with the six bodyguards in the room. None of the men in the room had been prepared for such a fierce assault and only one of their shots had hit him out of over a hundred rounds fired. Even then the round had only clipped him in the shoulder, doing little serious damage. With the armed opposition down, he turned his attention to the men sat at the table, who all immediately scrambled to reach the weapons dropped by the men paid to protect them.

Soon he was engaged in a second gun battle although he’d soon lessened the opposition’s numbers by four. At that moment however he took a bullet to the shoulder which sent him tumbling to the floor, still firing his Walther as he fell and bringing downing another two men. As he tried to fire again however the Walther clicked on empty and David realised he’d run out of ammunition, then looking up he saw the last member of the meeting pointing a Sig Sauer at his head. The man walked forwards, his face a mask of malice as he put the pistol flush against David’s head and prepared to fire. In that moment David’s hand came up and he seized the pistol by the barrel, twisted it out of the other man’s grasp and sent his other hand straight into the man’s throat crushing his windpipe and leaving him to choke to death.

With everyone in the room dead, David grabbed the Sig and hurried upstairs, just in time to see Mary shoot the last guard in the pub through the head killing him instantly. Turning she nodded to him, and he simply nodded back. Then the two left the pub, got into the Ford and drove back to Headquarters, even as the first sirens could be heard, announcing the arrival of the police on the scene.

Chapter 15

For the second time that day David surfaced from his memories, this time by Mary’s voice saying, “Come back to me.” As he looked at her with slight confusion plastered across his face, she explained, “I lost you there for a moment; you looked like you were in your own little world.”

“Just the past,” he replied, “I’ve been doing a lot of remembering these last couple of days, most of it the unpleasant things I’ve had to do. The things I’m not proud of, but they just had to be done.”

“You went back to that day then?” she asked despite already knowing what memories he’d been reliving, she’d been thinking of the same day as well.

He simply nodded in answer before finishing his coke, crushing the can and throwing it neatly into the bin next to the desk. Then he turned back to Mary, and asked, “Right so shall we get on with some work then? Did you arrange with Jack when we were going to join him?”

She shook her head, saying, “He said we should just turn up whenever we felt like it so if you’re ready then we can go now.”

David smiled, “There’s no hurry,” he said, “I’m happy to go whenever you are.”

Suddenly she leapt out of her chair, grabbed him by the hands and pulled him to his feet, then whirled out of the office, still pulling him along by the hand. As she did so, she said, “Well off we go then.”

As he was swept along the corridor, David couldn’t help but smile. Mary was nothing if not energetic and her energy was all too often contagious, although he’d seen that energy turn to feistiness in an instant and when she was in that kind of mood nothing could stop her doing what she wanted to.

It wasn’t long before the two of them were standing in front of Jack’s office, helped in part by Mary’s rapid pace as she effectively dragged David through the corridors. Once they’d arrived, she rapped smartly on the glass door and it quickly opened to reveal Jack standing there, looking like he hadn’t slept since the previous afternoon. Smiling at the sight of his two visitors, he stepped back to let them in and soon all three of them were seated comfortably in the office, which was larger than most other’s because of his seniority.

As soon as they were comfortable, Jack started things off. “Well first things first, let’s go over exactly what the plan is, and what you’ll be doing in the Stock Exchange, David. After that we can discuss any questions and we can also see how far along we are with the preparation. Is that alright with everyone?”

Mary couldn’t help but laugh, “Oh just get on with it for God’s sake. I’m getting bored already,” and at her words David couldn’t help but smile as well.

Jack was also smiling as he went on to say, “Alright, then let’s get started, first the plan. David, as you know we’re going to be your support for the mission. We’ll have eyes and ears inside the Stock Exchange and be in constant communication with you. Your job is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Stock Exchange’s security so we can work out how the terrorists might attack, and you’re also going to be trying to root out this alleged traitor.”

David interrupted at this point, “On that note, I was told there was a list of some sort being compiled of the most likely suspects. Have we actually got that yet or are we still waiting on our contact in the Exchange?”

Jack nodded saying “We’ve got the raw list but we’re still cross referencing the names against records. The analysts are hoping we’ll get lucky and find our traitor without having to put a man on the inside of the Exchange. At the very least we’re hoping to narrow the list down a bit for you. When they’re finished I’ll make sure you have it as soon as possible.”

Mary then asked the question that was now uppermost in David’s mind; “Excuse me, but what the hell are we actually going to do when it does all happen? Has anyone actually thought far enough ahead to consider that?”

“The Department itself won’t be doing anything; we can’t afford exposing ourselves to the public, especially on home soil. We have formed a strike unit though, formed out of some of our best operators, all of whom are officially attached to Special Forces units. They’re on standby to intervene at the Stock Exchange whenever this thing goes down. The idea is that as soon as these guys make their move, the team will try to take them by surprise and stop them before we have too many casualties on our hands.”

As Jack answered, David couldn’t help but notice that whoever had drawn up this plan was assuming that the strike team could operate quickly enough to save any hostages before they were executed without knowing anything about their opposition. Before he could point this out, Jack beat him to it saying, “I know the plan isn’t perfect but that’s what the Senior Mission Controllers have decided is best, and they’re the ones running the operation.”

Mary’s expression had become troubled; she could also see the plan’s flaw and wasn’t happy with that explanation but she knew it was pointless arguing with him as he couldn’t change it. So instead she asked another question, “Have we got any new intelligence by any chance. I’d welcome knowing anything more than we do, even if it is just a taunt from the opposition.”

“Nothing new I’m afraid,” Jack answered, “they seem to be keeping themselves low to the ground and we still have nothing in the way of intelligence. Now how about we discuss how far along we are with the preparation. Mary, do you wanna go first?”

“Sure,” she answered, “I’ve gone over everything we have for the Stock Exchange and I’ve examined several potential options both for the terrorist’s and our own assaults. To be honest security seems pretty tight though so if these guys are going to attack they’ll be heavily armed and there’s going to be blood no matter what happens. Next I’m planning to do some research on the Lawyer Department and checking up on our contact, making sure she’s not going to be a problem. Other than that I’m just going to be reminding myself of a load of law stuff so I can help David if he needs it at any point.”

As she finished speaking, Jack nodded, pleased with her progress, “Good job, I’ll go next. I’ve also evaluated the Stock Exchange, and its security and I agree with Mary’s assessment, at least on paper. I’m now going to get on with working with the analysts and talking to the Mission Controllers to get an idea of where everyone else is so I can get you two the latest information. I think it’ll be better if you act as the direct link with David, Mary and I’ll coordinate with the rest of the team, is that alright with you two?”

It’s fine with me,” Mary said, shortly followed by David’s agreement as well, and then it was time for David to reveal where he was in preparing for the mission.

“Alright my go,” he said, “I’ve also gone through the stuff on the Stock Exchange, and I’ve started on the Law stuff I’ve been given. I’m part of the way through but I have no idea whether it’s going in or how much I’ll be able to recall when I’m actually in the Stock Exchange so I’m quite glad you’re looking over it all again as well Mary.”

Jack then brought things to a close, “Right well that’s all we really need now so you guys get off home now if you want to, get some decent nights’ sleep, this mission might get a bit hectic before the end. Before you go though David have you got yourself booked in for the refresher?”

“Yeah Jack, I’ve got a slot on Friday so I’m doing it then, not that I really need to but it’s what the man upstairs wants.”

As he said this he saw the slight smiles on both Jack and Mary’s faces. They both knew how good he was because during his time at The Department he’d been used as a specialist on nearly a dozen occasions. Each time had either been to deal with crises on missions, or take out specific targets who posed a threat to The Department, the public or national security. The fact was that David hated a lot of those jobs because they required him to kill, but he also recognised both the importance of these jobs in protecting innocents and his aptitude for them.

The trio of friends shared their private joke for a moment before they finally went their separate ways. Mary and David went back to their separate offices to collect their belongings before heading back home to get full night’s sleep. David walked quickly, he was now very tired after working all day and looking forward to something to eat and getting to bed.

Chapter 16

David woke up to unfamiliar surroundings; he’d been living in his London flat for nearly three weeks. In fact he’d been there ever since the London Stock Exchange mission had gotten underway, but he still couldn’t get used to the place. It felt strange and alien to him, nothing was where he expected it to be and he still caught himself turning to a wall, looking for a door to a room that wasn’t there.

Getting out of bed slowly, he headed straight for the shower, as he passed the door to the other room he could hear sounds informing him Mary was probably waking up as well. As normal in the mornings, he remained effectively asleep until the moment the jet of hot water from the shower struck him on the back and shocked him fully awake.

Ten minutes later he walked out of the bathroom, wrapped only in his towel, to see Mary up and cooking breakfast already, still dressed in her pyjamas. “Shower’s free,” he said as he passed, smiling at his temporary roommate who reciprocated.

Then stepping out of the small kitchen area she pointed to a pan sizzling on the hob and said, “Thanks David, I’ll jump in. Do you mind watching this bacon while I’m in there?”

“Course not, just let me get dressed first,” and with that David walked back into his bedroom, and quickly got dressed into a dark suit, not unlike those often worn normally by Department agents. Then he walked back through into the open plan kitchen and living room. Still smiling Mary left the breakfast cooking in the kitchenette and went back into her room to grab a towel, before heading through into the bathroom.

Five minutes after taking charge of the breakfast, the bacon was finished and David had taken three of the rashers and cut two slices of bread to make himself a bacon sandwich. Setting aside Mary’s bacon on another plate, he sat down at the small circular dinner table, which had already been set, and helped himself to a glass of orange juice as he got down to eating his breakfast. A further ten minutes later and he was just finishing his breakfast as Mary walked out of the bathroom and walked back to her room to get dressed.

Fortunately Mary was quicker at dressing than she was at showering and only five minutes later she walked out with wet hair was pulled up into a ponytail and dressed simply in jeans and a T-shirt. Grabbing the plate with her bacon on it, she sat down across from David and set to with a will, as he watched bemused from across of the table.

“Sleep well?” he asked as he poured a glass of orange juice for her and placed it next to her left hand side.

“Not too bad thanks,” she replied as she took the glass and had a sip, “How about you?”

“Wasn’t a great night, but then they never are. This mission’s beginning to get to me though. I mean we were given a list of over a hundred names, not just lawyers but dozens of other people who may be involved. Since the mission started two weeks ago we’ve investigated three quarters of the names on that list and we seem to be no closer to discovering who the traitor actually is. Not only that but all the while I’m checking out everyone that walks into the Stock Exchange in case they turn out to be our terrorists. The fact is rather than just going on holiday as everyone else at University is, I’m down here working every day and trying to uncover a terrorist plot.” As he spoke he noticed Mary was nodding in agreement, she’d only just finished University a couple of years ago and she could well imagine how she would feel if she’d had to suddenly take weeks out at a time. The time that was lost would never be gotten back.

“I do understand David, and I’m on your side, you can believe that. You’re like my baby brother so I’m always on your side. But sometimes you just have to get on with the job, knowing that it has to be done for the sake of other people. Anyway we’d better stop chatting and get going; it’s nearly time for you to be at work.” As she said this Mary did her best to put on an understanding tone, but she could still see her companion’s irritation wasn’t diminished in any way by her understanding.

Noticing the time himself though, David quickly got out of his chair and headed to a coffee table in the living area of the room. Off the top he grabbed his keys, phone and wallet, while Mary picked up her jacket from a hook next to the door and a couple of other odds and ends from around the room.

David then grabbed a rucksack filled with the stuff he’d need for his day working at the Exchange and then the two of them left the flat they’d been living in for nearly three weeks. Outside the flat they found themselves confronted by the same dull, utilitarian corridor as always with the white painted walls seeming to stretch on for an eternity. Following the corridor to an elevator at the very end, they stepped and pressed the button for the very bottom floor. From there they walked to a nearby tube station and took a train that fortunately stopped not far from the Exchange. Once the two of them had gotten off the train, David walked directly to the Exchange while Mary went to meet up with Jack at the mission HQ to follow David’s day on the monitors as she did every day.

Just before entering the Exchange, David rummaged in his rucksack and found a clear plastic earpiece that could barely be seen. As he put it in, he could hear Mary’s voice in his ear. Satisfied that the earpiece was working fine, he then rummaged through the bag and found a tiny microphone which he fixed to the collar of his shirt, hiding it from sight using his tie.

“Can you hear me Mary?” he asked, the microphone picking up his voice and transmitting it to Mary who replied an affirmative. His equipment sorted, he finished his journey to the Exchange and walked in. The place was busy as usual but he confidently navigated his way through the organised chaos, eventually finding his way to his desk and sitting down to sort himself out for the day.

“Good morning Mister Smith, how are you today?” Looking up, David saw The Department’s contact among the Exchange’s Lawyers standing in front of him.

“Good morning. How’s business today?” he replied politely, he’d gotten to know the woman reasonably during his time and they’d been friendly from day one, but he could tell that his presence worried her slightly.

“Not too bad, we’ve got a couple of University kids coming in today for work experience put apart from that everything is as normal,” was the reply, even as David lowered his head to look back at the paperwork on his desk.

“Jolly good, I shouldn’t think I’ll be here many more days, so I’ll be out of your hair soon enough.” David and the contact shared a brief smile, but David’s soon slipped when he saw several people coming towards his desk, and recognised one of the smiling faces with a sudden brutal shock.

Getting up suddenly, he quickly made his excuses and hurried away, hoping against all hopes that he hadn’t been seen, as he made his way to somewhere that he could safely get in contact with Mary. In a stairwell he finally found some privacy and urgently told her about the new development. “Mary, we have a problem. My cover’s about to be blown and there’s nothing I can really do.”

“David what’re you talking about? How can anyone blow your cover?” she asked him with concern discernible in her voice.

“A friend from University’s here, presumably on work experience. If she sees me, she’ll recognise me and she knows me well enough to know there’s no reason that I should be here especially as I’m obviously not on work experience.” As he said it, the worry for David intensified, here he was unable to do anything to save the situation and it was all but certain that three weeks work was about to go down the drain.

For a moment there was silence over the radio as both of them thought what could be done about this new predicament. Then finally he heard Mary’s voice back in his ear. “Okay there’s not much that can be done really. Do your best to avoid your friend today and we’ll evaluate tomorrow, if she comes close to blowing the cover though two options. Talk to her and get her to keep quiet, or get out of there before she gets the chance.”

“Understood, I’ll do my best but be prepared for me fly out the doors at a moment’s notice, I can’t promise anything now. The game’s changed fundamentally here and I’ve lost control.” Having said that, David left the stairwell and headed back to his desk, although not before making sure his friend was nowhere in sight. Unable to see anything of her though, he sat down and got on with the day’s work, his mind now occupied by two other problems. The usual one of his job and the new one of trying to keep his cover intact. It was a small mercy though that that day at the office was about to be upturned fundamentally with the arrival of the very men he was on the lookout for.

Chapter 17

As David walked into the Stock Exchange that day, with little hope for anything interesting happening during the day, someone else in London was approaching the day with a lot more excitement. Nathaniel Adir was sitting in the warehouse, waiting for a call. It was a phone call that promised great things for the day and despite his normally reserved manner, he couldn’t keep the excitement from brewing inside of him. He’d been up since five in the morning waiting for the moment the phone would ring.

The fact was that he knew that everything was ready. Youssef had followed his orders to the letter and had kept a close eye on the men he’d recruited for this job. His reports had been promising with the equipment being sourced in a timely fashion and all of those involved proving capable enough with the weapons that had been provided. Meanwhile the virus he’d organised had been completed and the initial test results had been very promising. In fact he’d been in such a good mood he hadn’t killed the creator as he normally would have done, little did the man know just how dear his payment had nearly been for him. Now all he was waiting for was the call to say that the attack had begun, not that he doubted it would come, he’d told Youssef to run the operation personally and his faithful lieutenant had never failed him before.

Then, just as the clock ticked past nine o’clock in the morning, the phone rang suddenly breaking through the silence. Forcing himself to remain calm, he got up and with a hand only slightly trembling, picked up the phone. The caller didn’t bother with introductions or small talk, there was no need. Instead whoever it was just said, “We’re in.” That was all that was required and upon hearing those words Nathaniel hung up.

It was the news he’d been waiting to hear, his men had made it inside the Stock Exchange. Now all they had to do was follow the plan to the letter and in one fell swoop he would have the funds he needed for his most ambitious operation yet, and at the same time he’d cripple the Stock Exchange’s markets and deliver a very evocative message to the British people. The virus had also been designed to infect sensitive government and military systems in numerous countries, using the internet and once released it would take weeks to be stopped and by then the damage would be done.

Relishing the panic and destruction to come that would herald his inevitable success; Nathaniel hoped that his message to British intelligence had been deciphered. He wanted them to witness his moment of triumph, he wanted them to know he existed and he wanted them to fear him. All of that would be coming in the next few hours.

Nathaniel’s men had entered the London Stock Exchange in a variety of manners. Some had gotten jobs working as cleaners, others were dressed as electricians doing maintenance and some had gotten in as students on work experience. That morning was the first time the entire cell was positioned in the Stock Exchange at the same time. They’d smuggled their weapons and equipment inside in a variety of ways and hidden inside the building was more than enough weaponry for them to launch their takeover. The locations however, being out of the way by necessity, meant it wasn’t until mid morning that all members of the cell had managed to get to their weapons. Once they had though things began to happen very quickly.

Starting at the entrances, the twelve members of the group, all fully armed, locked down the Stock Exchange and then spread throughout the building rounding up everyone they found and gathered them together. Floor by floor everyone was rounded up into groups. Some were taken straight downstairs and then brought together on the main trading floor but some of the higher floors were held were they worked, guarded by machine gun toting militants. The security was quickly subdued and electronic surveillance disabled before anyone watching could glean any useful information.

The first David knew of the attack was a burst of gunfire coming from the direction of the stairs and before he could react three men appeared, all of them holding compact automatic weapons which looked extremely menacing. Quickly everyone in the office were forced into a single group and forced to kneel as the gunmen waited for instructions from their leader.

Meanwhile he could hear Mary arguing with someone in his ear, as she told whoever it was that sending in the strike team now would lead to massive casualties. Then his attention was brought back to his current situation when a scream next to him brought him face to face with his friend from university. For a moment neither spoke as Amanda just stared in disbelief at him, then recognition flashed through her eyes and he was forced to put a finger to his lips, even as her mouth opened to speak.

David meanwhile took a moment to assess his friend, there was fear in her green eyes that was bordering on hysteria but for the moment she was keeping that in control. He could see tremors running through her small frame though; she was literally shaking with fear as countless outcomes to the situation began to run through her mind, none of them good.

Then he turned away and examined the men in front of him. They were obviously well trained and ruthless. He could almost see their desire to kill everyone in the room, and the men certainly had the weaponry to manage it. Now he was close David could see the men were holding AK74Us, a compact version of the AK74 rifle, the successor to the famous AK47.

The leader of the men then spoke, his words occupying David’s full attention, “Listen to me! We are now in control. You will do what we say when we say, if you follow our instructions you will not be harmed. Now we have instructions to hold you here, along with any other stragglers who are found. You may talk quietly only, and if we suspect you of trying to cause trouble we will kill you without hesitation. You aren’t allowed to move anywhere without permission from one of my men.” As he listened, David was immediately struck by the man’s accent, it wasn’t Middle Eastern as he assumed it might be, instead it sounded like it belonged to the centre of London. Clearly it wasn’t just militants in Afghanistan he had to worry about, someone had been doing some recruiting on home soil.

Then the man, who David had subconsciously labelled as militant A, stopped speaking and moved away, leaving the hostages to talk quietly among themselves. Almost immediately David then found himself facing his friend who was clearly desperate to speak to him.

“Hello Amanda,” he said, beating her to the punch, “now I don’t want you to worry or panic. Everything is going to be okay, I promise.”

“How can you know that?” she asked; the fear obvious in her voice, “What is it about our current situation that makes you think we’ll be alright?”

“Amanda, try to be calm okay,” he replied, doing his best to inject a calming tone into his own voice, “I can’t tell you how but I know things will be alright, trust me.”

As he said this he saw that Amanda was taking note of his words and she was beginning to regain some semblance of control over her emotions. Then, happy that she wouldn’t now be freaking out, he looked around him, taking note of the locations of the terrorists, who in addition to A he labelled B and C. He also noticed that he had ended up kneeling next to his desk, a crucial position.

Meanwhile Mary, in a building only a couple of minutes away was sitting at her desk amid a chaotic scene as news of the attack sparked an instant argument over what to do. The men in charge advocated an immediate assault by the strike team they’d assembled from the Special Forces personnel. However Jack and several others, including the commander of the strike team, argued this was sheer folly and suggested that instead it would be better to gather some intelligence first and find out what they were dealing with before recklessly charging in and endangering the hostages.

The matter was only sorted when Jack got the Director on the phone and he gave instructions for the strike team to hold off until they had the necessary intelligence for an assault. As these events had unfolded, Mary had kept her microphone on; allowing David to hear what was happening, even as everyone in the room immediately set to the task of trying to work out what they were dealing with.

As he listened to everything changing where Mary was, David was confronted not only with the danger presented by the terrorists, but also questions from Amanda about everything that was going on and how he fitted in. The conversation changed quickly though after he refused to answer most of her questions, and soon the two began to talk about more familiar and mundane things like what had happened at University after he had left.

Things remained much the same for over an hour before he began to hear chatter through his earpiece. It seemed that the men in charge at Mary’s location had decided they’d gathered enough intelligence and were preparing to send in the strike team.

Less than five minutes after he heard this development, gunfire and explosions could be heard somewhere else in the building, and continued for several minutes, during which Mary’s voice sounded in his earpiece. “David, the strike team have gone in, but they’ve run up against fierce opposition. They’ve taken casualties and can’t get to the terrorists, I’ve been told to tell you that if the terrorists start executing hostages you’re to act. If that happens we’ll send the strike team back in, hoping that there’ll be enough of a distraction for them to make better progress.”

“Understood,” he managed to whisper back, eliciting a confused look from Amanda but fortunately not causing suspicion among the terrorists. Meanwhile the gunfire was dying away and he knew the strike team had been forced to retreat by the terrorists. As silence returned, conversation started up again among the hostages and Amanda began to talk to him again, restarting their previous conversation, before it moved onto to a topic that took David completely by surprise.

“David, I don’t know what’s going to happen, but there’s something I want to tell you in case either one of us doesn’t get through this.” As Amanda said this David began to detect, for the first time since meeting her, something else in her tone.

However before she could tell him exactly what it was she wanted to, the terrorists began to move around the room and the leader began to address them all. “Alright, listen up. We’re moving you to join the other hostages. Women go first, and then the men, no one try anything funny or else there’ll be a lot of dead bodies in this room, just like the soldiers who just failed to save you.”

With that the terrorists moved through the hostages and dragged the women away and into a separate group that was quickly conducted away by Militant B, while Militants A and C stayed behind to watch the men. As they waited, the two men talked idly amongst themselves and David was just close enough to them to hear some of what was being said. “What’s the point of this? We’re going to be wasting all of the hostages when we’re down, so why move them from here now?”

The reply to this came quickly and it was not what David wanted to hear. “We’re only moving the women from here as the Boss thinks they’ll be better bargaining chips when it comes to it. All of the hostages from the other floors are already downstairs by now. The men aren’t leaving this room though; when the other guy gets back we’re going to execute them all as a message against further rescue attempts.”

He then tuned out the rest of the conversation, he’d heard enough and now it was time to decide on a plan of action. He was still next to his desk, which meant he had a chance. The fact was he had hidden a Walther, a Browning, plenty of ammunition and a knife underneath and inside his desk. If he could reach this small arsenal he was confident he could take the terrorists by surprise and prevent any casualties.

From there he could launch a surprise attack on the remaining terrorists and rescue Amanda and the other hostages. As he thought of this he was surprised to note how much importance he placed on Amanda’s safety in particular, then his professionalism took over and he instead focused on preparing for what was to come.

Over the next few minutes he slowly but surely shuffled himself closer and closer to his desk. His one chance was the Walther which he’d stuck to the underside of his desk drawers using a magnetic clip. It was already loaded with a full clip with seven rounds plus a further round in the barrel and it had an attached Carswell silencer, which would help by not alerting the other terrorists that the tables had been turned on them.

Even as he finished manoeuvring himself, the Militant B returned and he knew he had to act now or not have the chance to act at all. Placing his hand underneath the desk drawers he found the butt of the Walther and pulled it free of the magnetic clip. Then, as the other two terrorists joined their companion, he made his move. Not bothering to stand, he raised the Walther from his knelt position and fired three times in very quick succession.

The first shot caught the terrorist on the far left in the throat and he tumbled to the ground and then, as the other two reacted, the other rounds hit them full force. One was a straight headshot that sent the man on the right crashing to the ground without a sound, while the last round caught the final terrorist in the chest. This last man swayed for a moment on the spot, and even began to raise his AK when David fired a fourth shot that hit the man in between the eyes and put him on the ground as well, a rapidly spreading blood pool appearing like a grisly halo around his head.

Before the other hostages could react, David stood up and said, “Nobody move or make a sound otherwise the comrades of these men will execute the other hostages. I’m going to deal with them but you have to stay here a while longer, or else everything will go wrong.”

Once he was sure the other men would follow his instructions, David checked the terrorists were all dead before reloading his Walther and putting it at the back of his waistband. Then he claimed the rest of his arsenal from the bottom drawer of his desk.

Suitably armed he checked in with Mary, “Control, their plan was to execute all of the hostages from the beginning. I’ve taken out three but there are more with the other hostages. I’m going to save them, let the strike team know so they can come running if I lose the element of surprise.” As Mary said she understood, he set off and headed towards the stairwell as he began to hunt down the rest of the terrorists.

As he searched he decided to head in the direction of the trading floor, which was where he’d heard one of the terrorists say the hostages were being kept. As he went, he was constantly on the alert at being discovered, and his knife unsheathed and ready for instant use, it was silent and deadly, the necessary combination for his situation.

It was fortunate he was exercising such caution as enroute to the trading floor he literally bumped into a terrorist who was watching the main entrance to the building. Before the other man had even opened his mouth to call out an alarm, David had plunged his blade into his neck, severing the jugular and causing the man to bleed out on the floor within minutes. David barely bothered to pause though and after kicking the man’s weapon away from his hand, continued to move towards the rest of the hostages. As he moved he transferred the knife into his left hand and put the Walther into his right, continuing to be cautious at all time in case he came across any other terrorists guarding the approach.

Once again his caution was well founded as there were two more men keeping watch just outside the trading floor, and fortunately they were standing just out of sight of the trading floor room. Moving forward quickly David fired the Walther in his right hand, hitting the man furthest away in the head, then as the nearer man turned to confront him he thrust with the knife, burying the blade deep into the man’s chest and rupturing his heart. This time he didn’t take any chances though and fired the Walther at point blank into the man’s head to stop him having any chance of crying for help. Now David just had to contend with the remaining terrorists guarding the hostages in the trading room, which was straight through the doors right in front of him.

Replacing the Walther at the back of his waistband, David produced the Browning and held it in a steady two handed grip. Before rushing in though he opened the door nearest him a fraction and peered into the room. There were six terrorists in the room, all of them were heavily armed and it appeared that they’d even had time to wire some explosives around the room. Closing the door quietly, he took a deep breath. He knew that his current plan of action was very risky, but considering the threat the terrorists posed to the hostages he didn’t see an alternative.

With that in mind he tightened his grip on the Browning and cocked it, before kneeling by the door and opening it slightly to allow him to enter the room a split second quicker. He knew that might be something that might make all the difference. Then, just as he heard the obvious leader of the terrorists ask “where the hell have those three upstairs gotten to?” he slammed his shoulder against the door and burst into the room.

His appearance took the remaining terrorists completely by surprise and he used that to good effect. He fired in double taps, killing two men before they’d even turned to face the door. Both went down as his shots hit them in the heart. The other four reacted quickly though and were soon sending bursts of fire towards David, who kept moving at full pace, darting between desks which offered the only form of cover.

As he moved David kept firing and another man went down with a shot to the head as David moved in on the last three at a dead charge. Firing twice more he managed to hit the man on the right in the chest and the man on the left in the shoulder. By he was then too close to fire again and instead unsheathed his knife and stabbed the terrorist in the throat before pivoting to face his last living enemy.

However as he turned, the last man fired. The bullet slamming into David’s shoulder and sending him tumbling to the ground. Quickly regaining his feet, David trained his pistol on the last enemy, ignoring the pain radiating throughout his left hand side and struggling to see his target clearly. Then he took a deep breath and his vision cleared somewhat, only for him to see, with a sinking heart, that the man had grabbed the nearest hostage to use as a human shield and that that hostage just happened to be Amanda. Keeping his pistol firmly trained on the terrorist, David looked desperately for any kind of shot that would take the man out of the game and save Amanda but the terrorist was cleverer than that and kept his entire body and head hidden behind his hostage.

“Drop it,” the man said, and having no other choice David obliged, putting the safety on his Browning before placing it on the ground and straightening back up. No sooner had he done this than a shot rang out and he felt a burning sensation in his right side as the terrorist’s bullet struck him full force and sent him to the floor once again. As he lay there, feeling the coolness of the surface through his shirt, he saw the terrorist approaching, pistol in one hand and a firm grip on Amanda’s upper arm in the other.

Standing over him, the terrorist before slowly and deliberately aimed his pistol at David’s head. This pause gave David all the time he needed and despite his cramped position lying on the floor, he managed to get to his Walther in the rear of his waistband and fired a round that struck the final terrorist in the hand. As the Browning tumbled to the ground and Amanda tore herself free of the man’s grip, the terrorist let out an unearthly scream of pain. David meanwhile kicked the man in the knee, sending him tumbling to the ground where a final blow from David’s fist laid the man unconscious.

At that moment there was suddenly a cacophony of noise and the strike team, responding to the gunfire burst into the room, weapons at the ready to deal with any threat. As they charged in, David, who had managed to get back onto his feet, turned to them and pointed to the remaining living terrorist and said, “Truss him up and process the hostages, one of them is the traitor we’ve been looking for.”

Nodding the strike team got to it, conducting the hostages out of the room and out the front of the building where they zip tied everyone until they could ascertain who the traitor was. This was unnecessary however.

No sooner had this process begun, than one of the lawyers David had left upstairs came in, an AK gripped tight in his hands. He’d clearly come to kill someone, but he didn’t even get the chance to speak. On seeing the weapon in the man’s hands the nearest two members of the strike team trained their MP5’s on him and fired a short burst each, killing him instantly and removing the threat.

With the last loose end tied up David decided the job was over and, with Amanda hugging him furiously as if she were afraid that to let him go would be to return to the terrifying ordeal she’d just been through, he walked out of the London Stock Exchange and onto the street.

Chapter 18

As David walked onto the street, he saw Mary was already waiting for him in front of the building with a car idling, ready to take him back to the flat. Approaching with a smile on her face, Mary went to hug him, before seeing the blood seeping through the fabric of his shirt. Immediately her expression turned to one of concern, but that didn’t stop her from saying, “Good job David, no dead hostages means a perfect end to this operation, and we’ve even got a suspect to interrogate.”

Then her attention became fixed on the forced grin he was wearing, and the pain in his eyes and she began acting like the big sister she’d always seen herself as. Taking immediate charge she said, “Now what have you done to yourself? Come on, let’s go and see the paramedics and get you patched up before taking you home.”

She then put an arm on his right arm and forcefully steered him towards a waiting ambulance. It was one of several that had been brought there in case of injuries to the hostages and leaning against the vehicle was a young paramedic, waiting to do something. Presented with David, he bandaged the young man as best he could and then forced him into the back of the ambulance, in spite of protests from his patient. The paramedic was firm and said he needed to be taken to the hospital to assess the full damage and get stitches. As the ambulance sped away with sirens blaring, Mary turned to Amanda and said, “I assume you’re David’s friend from University? Come with me, I’ll take you to the hospital.”

Amanda nodded before asking, “Who is he really? And who are you?” As she said this she wore a mixed expression, part confusion and part horror at what she’d seen and learned in the last couple of hours.

Mary just smiled sadly. While she felt for the young woman walking next to her towards the car, she could only say “I’m sorry but that’s classified.” Foregoing any further questioning, Amanda followed her to the car and got into the passenger seat as she began to drive to the hospital.

As they drove, Amanda remained silent as a storm of emotions raged through her mind. There was intense relief at coming out of the Stock Exchange alive, and shock stemming from going through that experience. Then there were her emotions concerning David. Inside she’d been about to lay her heart bare and tell him just how deeply she felt towards him. But the courage to do that had largely come from the fear of the situation. Now that there was no danger she wondered how she could summon the same courage to tell David exactly how she felt.

These thoughts occupied Amanda’s full attention right up to the hospital, where Mary pulled into a nearby car park before the two of them completed their journey on foot. When they arrived, Mary asked to see David at the reception but they were immediately told that he was in theatre being stitched up and they would have to wait. So, rather reluctantly, Mary and Amanda sat down in the waiting room and consigned themselves to a couple of hours there before David was in a fit state to receive visitors.

So they waited in the rather dreary waiting room, surrounded by light green walls, lino floors and blue plastic chairs. It was the same surroundings they’d have found across the country in any hospital possible. As they sat there, on uncomfortable chairs that forced them to fidget constantly, the pair tried to relieve their boredom, and worry, by talking, although almost immediately Mary found herself in a professional quandary when Amanda again asked, “Who is he?”

This question had Mary’s full attention as she wondered where this was going, and what she could actually say in answer to the question. In the end she opted to play things safe and said, “What do you mean?” internally she decided to wait for Amanda to say something more about what was on her mind regarding David.

For a moment Amanda’s expression made it seem like she was going to clam up completely and for a few seconds there seemed to be a real internal battle of wills going on in her mind. Eventually though she took a deep breath and said, “I’m one of David’s best friends at University, and I thought I knew everything important about him. But then this comes along and it’s like I don’t know the man at all. When I saw him in that room he was completely different; he killed four men without a second thought. I just can’t reconcile the two sides I’ve seen of him and I wonder whether everything I’ve seen at University is just a smokescreen. So who is the real David Ryder?”

Mary now saw Amanda’s problem and wondered how exactly she could give her the answer she deserved while not revealing classified information. But after considering her words very carefully, she finally said, “I’m not sure what he’s like at University. David is a very private person when it comes to discussing the other half of his life. I can say though that he’s the best man I’ve ever met, and while there’s a lot you don’t understand, I can be sure that the man you know is the one you saw today, underneath everything else.”

Amanda’s troubled look didn’t dissipate as Mary hoped however and instead she asked, “But how can you live two lives that are polar opposites and yet be the same person?”

“Well what is David like at University?” Mary could help but ask, wondering what new things she might find out about her friend. Amanda didn’t hesitate before answering this, almost as if she’d been expecting the question and had rehearsed or answer. Or maybe she just knew her David Ryder well enough to be able to answer the question straight away, Mary wasn’t sure.

“Well he’s a really nice guy,” Amanda started by saying, “ he’s always polite and a constant presence; he makes sure he pops in to see most people in the house at least a couple of times a day to talk to them. He’s smart and gets good marks but he never lets essays and stuff control his day. But then there’s always been something restrained about him, he’s never gotten properly drunk but on the few occasions he’s had a bit too much, his temper always seems to be close to the surface and it’s easy to provoke him. He’s always got to being control of everything, himself and the situation.”

As Mary listened, she found herself warming to this other David even as she recognised that some of the characteristics being pointing out were a result of David’s work. The reluctance to get drunk in particular and the maintenance of control were likely due to his mental discipline and probably a fear of doing something he later regretted. The temper issue might come from bad memories and mental strain as well.

As all of this occurred to Mary, she realised Amanda was waiting for some kind of comment. One that hopefully would prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the David she knew at University wasn’t a lie. Mary decided to give the young woman the fullest answer she could.

“That sounds like the David I know. There are some differences sure but that’s to be expected considering the circumstances, the character of the man you’re describing though sounds like the man I know.” This answer seemed to finally allay Amanda’s worries and doubts and she lapsed into a temporary silence.

At the same time a new arrival in the waiting room had Mary’s full attention and she stood up to greet the Director who’d just arrived, “Afternoon sir, what are you doing here?”

“Ah, Agent Hall, I wanted to see him, is he receiving visitors yet?” the Director asked, the barest hint of concern discernible in his tone and his expression neutral as always.

“No sir,” she answered, “the doctors said it might be a couple of hours before he’s out of surgery and recovered from the anaesthetic. Why the urgency if I may ask?”

The Director’s expression didn’t change whatsoever and he just said, “Agent Hall, our present company means that I couldn’t possibly answer that. You can introduce me however?”

“Sorry sir. This is Amanda, one of Ryder’ friends from University, she was at the Stock Exchange for work experience and got caught up in the events.”

“Ah,” the Director said a slightly troubled expression now on his face, “I take it then that this young lady witnessed Ryder in action and she’s deduced something of what he does?”

Mary smiled at that, “What do you think, Director?”

He then turned to Amanda and said, “Young lady, I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to come by our office sometime in the near future. There’s a matter of national security to be addressed.”

Amanda looked at the man in front her with a defiant look in her eyes as she answered, “I assume this is about David’s employment? Fine I’ll do whatever you want but in return I want to know more about what he does for you. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

For a moment the Director didn’t answer as he looked at the young woman in front of him and assessed the risks but then he gave in and said, “Very well. Agent Hall can answer some of your questions, while not giving any specifics about any current operations. In return you’ll have to sign the Official Secrets Act. I suppose satisfying your curiosity a little now will prevent you prying later, I hope so at any rate for your sake young lady. Now I have a meeting with the PM to get to, he’s screaming blue murder about today’s events and has demanded I turn up to tell him what we’re doing.”

With that the Director left and Mary turned to Amanda who already had a question ready for her. “Okay Mary, who do you work for is my first question.”

Mary thought for a moment before answering. The Director had told her to answer some of Amanda’s questions and that certainly could apply to the question she’d just been asked. But anyone who joined the Department had to sign some pretty serious documents that effectively said if you revealed the unit’s existence you accepted a mandatory sentence of ten years minimum and the loss of all pension benefits. So rather than be totally truthful, she opted for the usual line any agent used when questioned. “David and I work for British Intelligence; specifically we deal with counter terrorism mostly.”

At this point Amanda interrupted and said, “And where does David fit in? Is his job to kill people or something because he looked very good at it?”

“Amanda, all the agents David and I work with have killed before, but the people we kill are some of the worst examples of humanity you could ever come across. We never harm innocents if it can be helped. Now concerning David, he’s killed many people, but none of them were people you’d like to know and in doing so he’s saved many more than he’s killed. Just an example of that is his work as a trouble-shooter.”

“What’s a trouble-shooter?” Amanda couldn’t help but ask.

“A trouble-shooter is the name we give for a particular kind of specialist. They’re people with a specific skill set who are used when something goes seriously wrong or we need to act quickly. If missions go catastrophically wrong, agents get taken hostage, or if there’s someone we need to take out quickly to keep innocents safe then we send in a trouble-shooter. They go in and sort out the problem, that’s it. For them there are no rules other than ensuring the safety of innocents and the success of the mission.” As she explained, Mary could see a troubled expression on Amanda’s face that then turned to repulsion and disgust as she finished speaking.

Seeing that expression, she almost thought Amanda was going to storm out there and then, but eventually she controlled herself and asked a final question. “So you’re telling me that my friend, someone I’ve trusted is in fact nothing more than an assassin killing at the drop of the hat anyone considered dangerous by the government?”

As she spoke, Mary picked up on a revolted undertone to Amanda’s voice and knew she had to handle this delicately for David’s sake. In the end she said, “I’m telling you that when the lives of innocent people are at risk, David is called upon to act. He does whatever he considers necessary to protect those people. Let me ask you something, what do you think of me?”

“What?” Amanda’s voiced clearly carried her confusion over such a frank question.

“Do you consider me a good or bad person? If I were to die tomorrow suddenly, how would you feel?” Mary asked, expanding on her original question.

Amanda took a moment to think before eventually saying, “Well I’d feel sad, I’ve not known you long but you’ve made an impact on me. I wouldn’t like the fact you’d died for certain.”

Mary smiled slightly at Amanda’s diplomatic way of saying she didn’t know, then she played her trump card. “If it weren’t for David I’d have died two and a half years ago. I was on a mission that was compromised and I was taken hostage with the rest of my team. They were going to torture us for information then they were going murder us. I was going to be raped beforehand though. They were even arguing who would go first, and then David arrived. I’d only met him once before and it was before he’d gained a reputation. When he walked in I didn’t recognise him at first and the bad guys knew him so I figured he was there to help them. Then everything changed, at the drop of a hat he produced a Walther and shot three of the four men. The last one tried to use me as a human shield, David just shot him in the head over my shoulder. I won’t deny that David is thoroughly ruthless when the occasion calls for it, but if he wasn’t then he’d have died that day and so would I, do you still consider him a bad person?”

As Mary recounted her story, she saw Amanda’s expression evolve from one full of negative emotion to one that still showed distaste. But her expression now included respect and other more positive feelings that indicated she might have turned a corner in her thinking. Her answer confirmed this to Mary who was immensely relieved to hear Amanda speak with a positive tone. “I never considered him a bad person, I just doubted how someone could do that kind of work, kill people with so little consideration and yet still be the person I thought I’d known before today.”

“Don’t think he does anything without consideration Amanda. David’s decisions remain with him constantly, even if they were the only decision he could make. It’s one reason that he doesn’t sleep well. The thing is that David never shies away from making difficult decisions in an instant, even if he does sometimes make those decisions without thinking everything through.” As Mary finished her interruption she saw Amanda understood what she was saying and was relieved. It seemed she’s managed to get through this particular emotional minefield without damaging David and Amanda’s friendship.

Chapter 19

After finishing their conversation, the two women lapsed into silence for a while as each wondered how their friend was doing in surgery. Then the door to the waiting room opened and in walked Jack Stirling, looking exhausted and extremely worried. Seeing Mary sat there he hurried straight over and said, “How is he?”

“He’s in surgery, they said to wait here until he wakes up from the anaesthetic. In the mean time you might as well wait with us.” Nodding he turned to sit down next to her, only to find himself eye to eye with Amanda.

Before either could speak, Mary leapt in to make the introductions, saying, “Jack this is Amanda, one of David’s friends from University. Amanda this is Jack, he’s been working with David from day 1.”

“Really?” she asked, not quite hiding the interest in her voice, “What can you tell me about that?”

Jack looked at Mary, who nodded and said, “The Director said as long as it wasn’t an active operation we could tell her.”

He then turned back to Amanda and answered her question, saying, “Well David’s first mission was three years ago and it turned into a disaster. The mission was investigating an international organised crime syndicate that we discovered had links to terrorism. The plan was to infiltrate the syndicate at the British end, gather the intelligence and use that to root out the group’s operations overseas and the terrorists they were doing business with.”

“So what happened?” Amanda asked, interrupting him mid flow but her curiosity won out.

“Well he got into the group easily enough, helped by a back story painting him as the bad boy from hell. Everything went wrong after that point though and he ended up being taken to a training camp in the middle of nowhere to act as an instructor. While he was there a Russian Agent for military intelligence, but her cover was blown and she was interrogated and was due to be executed. David freed her in the middle of the night and blew up the camp. Then he just had to drive across the desert for a couple of days and I picked them at the nearest airport.” As he finished his story, Jack saw Amanda was wearing an incredulous expression.

“He was sixteen when all of this happened?” she couldn’t help but ask with shock and wonder in her voice. He just nodded, smiling slightly, everyone who’d met David had reacted with similar shock when they’d found out how young he was when he’d been recruited.

At that moment a doctor walked into the waiting room and told the three of them, “He’s awake and ready to receive visitors but I must insist that you go in one at a time and you mustn’t stress the patient.”

Jack immediately got up and said, “I need to talk to him first. There are some details I need to go over for my report on the operation and the aftermath. You don’t mind do you?” As Mary and Amanda shook their heads, he walked out, following the Doctor to David’s room, leaving the other two behind.

It was then that Amanda asked Mary a question that had occurred to her while Jack had been telling his story. “Mary, do you know if there was anything between David and this Russian agent? Is there anything between you and him even?” as she asked she looked at Mary anxiously, like the wrong answer would be more than she could bear.

Mary couldn’t help smiling at this and said, “Ah, so it’s like that is it?”

At that Amanda began to blush furiously, her cheeks quickly turning bright red with embarrassment. This just made Mary smile even more, as Amanda said, “You didn’t answer me.”

After treating Amanda to another knowing smile, Mary said, “No there was nothing between David and Katya, and there’s nothing between me and him either. The ways clear for you. In fact I could check how he feels about you if you like.” It was the answer Amanda had been hoping for and she was smiled with relief as she heard Mary’s words.

“No, please don’t,” she said, unable to stop a pleading tone from entering her voice, “I don’t think he likes me the same way and I don’t want to change our friendship or make it awkward. I was going to tell him at the Exchange but I never got the chance. Now I’m not in danger of being executed it seems pointless for me to risk our friendship.”

Holding her hands up in a placatory gesture, Mary said, “Don’t worry I’m not going to say anything. But I know David, and I also know you can never know how he truly feels until you ask him. Sometimes it appears he feels one way when he doesn’t or there are no indications when he feels very strongly about something.”

At that moment she looked up to see Jack round the corner and walk into the waiting room. Nodding in his direction she said, “Anyway there’s Jack so he must be finished with David. Let’s go and see the man of the hour?”

As Mary said this, Amanda, who was looking far more relieved, also noticed him walk back into the waiting room. Without breaking stride he gave a nod to the two women and continued on, walking straight out of the hospital. Meanwhile the two women were shown to David’s room by the doctor who then left them at the door. Rather than go in one at a time, they decided to bend the rules and walked in together, although once inside Mary leant against the wall in the background and let Amanda take the chair next to the bed.

Inside the room David was sitting up and looking reasonably healthy and alert considering what he’d been through in the last few hours. In fact the only obvious things wrong with him were the sling around his left arm, and a slightly paler tone to his cheeks. As Amanda sat down at his bedside, he said, in a noticeably weaker voice, “So how’re you doing Amanda?”

At this she couldn’t help but laugh, even as her eyes teared up, and she answered, “I’m good, Mary’s been telling me about this other life you seem to be leading. But I’m not the one you should be worried about.”

“Really? I got the impression that was highly classified, you haven’t been breaking any rules have you Mary?” he asked, a slight note of worry in his voice but the slight smile on his face not wavering for a moment.

Mary stepped forward as that and said, “Of course not, I’m a model employee. The Director said I could divulge anything that connected to an active operation.”

He nodded before asking Amanda “So now you know the whole truth about me. What do you think?”

Amanda thought for a moment as she wondered how to answer him. In the end she opted for the diplomatic truth and said, “Well I can’t imagine how you got involved with these guys, MI5 or MI6, Mary hasn’t actually told me which one. But she has helped me see that no matter what you’ve done in this life, the fact remains you’re the same man I know from University. It helps that you saved me at the Stock Exchange today as well. That slightly skews my opinion.”

As Amanda said this she smiled slightly to let him know no matter what had been revealed, it wouldn’t change things between them. This allayed some of his fears, he’d already come to the conclusion that Mary would have said some things to Amanda, even if she hadn’t gone into details. Then he couldn’t help but go back to the conversation inside the Stock Exchange and asked Amanda, “Hey Amanda. In the Stock Exchange you said you wanted to say something to me and it seemed pretty important to you. What was it?”

At this she blushed again, although the tint in her cheeks from before hadn’t quite disappeared anyway, as she struggled to stay composed. Fortunately Mary came to her rescue and said, “Hey, stop putting the poor girl on the spot, especially considering what she’s been through today.”

At this he looked slightly sheepish and said, “Sorry,” to Amanda, before inclining his head to Mary and saying, “do you know when I can leave?”

“I’m afraid not David, I’ll ask for you though,” and with that she left the room, leaving Amanda and David alone.

“Have you called home yet?” he asked her, breaking the brief silence between them.

She nodded, saying, “Yeah, I texted my mum saying I was fine and I’d be home soon. Everyone at home was going spare for a while though. Mum left work as soon as she heard the news to look after my younger sister, and my older brother went there as well. I have a feeling it’s going to be hugs and tears when I get home.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said, “they must have been worried sick about you, I know my parents would be if they were still around.” At that moment an emotional cloud suddenly come over the room and David became withdrawn and silent as he thought back to what he’d lost.

The darkened mood lifted quite suddenly a few moments after with Mary’s reappearance. Walking to the other side of David’s bed, she said, “The doctor’s say that your injuries were fairly superficial; the shot to your side only tore through soft tissue and didn’t damage any organs so there’s not too much that needs to heal there. The shot to your shoulder was slightly more problematic apparently, the bullet nicked the scapula and the clavicle but it didn’t do much damage to either. Even so they want to keep you in for observation for a couple of days, then you can go home but you need to come in for checkups every day.”

At that he sighed loudly and dramatically, before saying “It sounds like I’m going to have a wonderful time then.”

Mary just laughed at that and went on to say, “It gets better. When I said you lived alone they suggested you stay with someone, they don’t want you stressing your body out too much.”

At that he interrupted and said, “I don’t care what they say, I’m not going to be a nuisance for anyone purely because it’s doctor’s orders.”

“That’s what I figured you’d say,” Mary replied, the smile still on her lips, “So I’ve decided that you’ll be enjoying my company at your home until you’re given a clean bill of health. I figured it might as well fall to me to make sure you don’t do anything that might make things worse.”

David smiled slightly at that, “I suppose I can live with that, I’ll only be stuck here going out of my mind for a few days and after that I’ll have you to drive me insane.”

At this Mary’s expression became one of mock outrage that had Amanda laughing loudly and had him smiling even more widely. “I’ll be driving you insane? What about the last three weeks where you’ve been driving me insane with your inability to cook. I can’t go five minutes without checking you’re not burning our meal to a crisp.”

The pair continued their mock argument for another few minutes, trading various silly insults in that time. Amanda just watched everything unfold with more and more amusement, as things got more and more ridiculous. Eventually though they ran out of inventive things to say and everything calmed down a bit as they all began a more normal conversation that lasted for another hour.

After a while the doctor came in to remove the visitors and let David get some rest. At the same time Amanda checked the time on her phone and saw it was nearly two in the afternoon. She knew her family would be anxious to see her and decided it was time she went home. As she announced her plan, Mary offered to drive her home, saving the cost of a train fare.

Meanwhile David lay in his hospital bed, and as he lay there he couldn’t shake the feeling that something had begun at the Stock Exchange that day; and whatever had been started wasn’t over by a long shot. Unfortunately for him, he was exactly right, and even at that moment Nathaniel was planning revenge for the failure of the operation.

He’d been told about the failure of the operation, not by any of his subordinates who were all dead, but instead by the news. There was a special report repeating on the BBC and Nathaniel, who’d been watching in expectation of hearing about something on the Stock Exchange, was instead treated to a shock.

With the realisation that has men had failed to complete their mission before their inevitable deaths, Nathaniel flew into an unstoppable rage. He went on a rampage around the warehouse. What little furniture he had was reduced to splinters, the small television was sent crashing to the floor and his belongings were strewn across the floor.

In the end it took more than twenty minutes for his rage to subside and then his thoughts cleared and in an instant became focused on the thought of revenge. He decided first to find out everything he could about who’d been responsible for denying him. There was only one place to find that information however and while he hated to deal with these people, they were once again a necessary evil for Nathaniel and he picked up the phone to make the call he needed.

For a moment the phone rang but then someone picked up and said “What is it?” hearing those words, which were almost a comfort in light of the news he’d just received, Nathaniel smiled and gave a reply.

“I need information in.” These words immediately had the man on the other end of the phone moving, and Nathaniel waited patiently for someone else to announce their presence on the other end. This presently came but rather than small talk, Nathaniel launched straight into his problem. “I need to know who was at the Stock Exchange today. Who ended the siege?”

For a moment the man on the other end remained entirely silent, not even the sound of his breathing audible to Nathaniel. Then after several minutes, by which time he’d managed to convince himself that he wasn’t going to get an answer, a voice on the other end finally spoke. “There’s a complete blackout on who was responsible for ending the siege, officially the credit’s gone to MI5 and the Police.”

“What about unofficially?” Nathaniel interrupted, impatient to have something out of the day’s disasters.

“Unofficially there’s a rumour on the streets, a very faint rumour mind you, that The Department were involved.”

Finally Nathaniel’s patience snapped and he said angrily, “How come no one knows who was responsible? And what the hell is The Department.”

“No one knows because it’s been handled very carefully by the British Government,” the other man’s voice was now very cold and for a moment Nathaniel was reminded just how dangerous these people were. They were global, they could find him anywhere and they’d think nothing of killing him to make a point. So rather than say anything else he waited patiently for the other man to answer his second question, struggling to master his anger the entire time.

“As for what The Department is? Well that is a much bigger question. Very few are privy to any kind of information on them but a contact has informed me that they are a highly select branch of British Intelligence. They only deal with the most dangerous, sensitive and difficult assignments both on home soil and abroad and their only rule is to complete the mission.”

Feeling that he was now getting somewhere, Nathaniel had only two more questions for his underworld contact and said, “Any idea who their man on the ground was? And where can I find them?”

“You’re thinking of revenge are you?” It was a statement rather than a question as the man went on to say, “Where is easier than who. They have a headquarters building in the middle of London; I’ll email the address to you along with anything else I know. Who is another matter entirely and not one I can definitively answer, but my guess would be David Ryder.”

“Who’s that?” Nathaniel demanded, even as he came to the dim realisation that the other man had clearly expected his call and had guessed his questions long before he’d picked up the phone. He now just wondered how much this information was going to cost him. Some people would ask for payment up front but these men didn’t bother. The implication was that anyone trying to get away with not paying would be found in pieces if at all.

“He’s one of the top agents for The Department but what’s really incredible is he’s only nineteen. He’s what they call a troubleshooter and is very good at dealing with the kind of situation you caused at the Stock Exchange today. That’s all I have for you right now, payment details remain the same, as does the price of information. I’ll throw in any further developments as a free bonus.”

Then the phone went dead and Nathaniel was left holding the handset in one hand and staring blankly into the wall in front of him as he already planned his revenge on David Ryder. The man had made himself a target and now the ‘Brigade of the Faithful’ would kill him for his interference. For him the day of retribution couldn’t come soon enough and he only hoped that he would be able to end the man’s life himself, personally and face to face.

Chapter 20

David woke up to the sound of someone moving around downstairs. Slowly sitting up in his bed and ignoring the slight pain and stiffness in his side and shoulder, he considered just lying in bed and waiting for Mary to bring him some breakfast as he knew she would do if he just waited. But then he heard a crash from downstairs and the sound of a woman swearing. Slowly getting out of bed and putting on a dressing gown he decided to head downstairs and check that everything was alright.

As he moved, his still healing injuries protested slightly and he kept ignoring the dull pain in his side and shoulder as he walked downstairs. Entering the kitchen, he saw Mary on her hands and knees with a dustpan and brush as she swept up the remains of a plate. “Are you alright?” he asked, his sudden breaking of the silence taking her by surprise.

“David, what are you doing up? You’re supposed to be taking things easy; it was only two weeks ago that you were shot,” she said. As she did so she walked up to him, took him by the arm and began to guide him towards the living room, despite his protests.

“Mary, don’t worry so much. I’m perfectly able to walk to the living room on my own; I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” Even as he said this, David found himself forced through to the living room, her hand firm on his arm as she kept him moving.

“That’s a novel idea, the patient checking up on the carer. I’m fine, now you go and sit down and I’ll bring you something to eat and don’t forget you’ve got a couple of visitors coming today.”

He smiled at that. Mary seemed to be taking great care to remind him every five minutes that he had guests coming. But rather than argue he decided to capitulate and just walked across the living room and sat down on the sofa before turning the television on. As he flicked through the channels, Mary came through with a tray in her hands containing his breakfast. Taking the tray from her, he said, “Thanks, and you should take a break you know. You’ve been working flat out recently. Come on, get your breakfast and sit down with me and relax a bit.”

She smiled at that, “Well if Sir insists,” she replied, a joking tone in her voice. Both of them managed to hold a straight face for a moment, before they began to laugh helplessly, even as she headed back into the kitchen to collect her own breakfast. She was still laughing a little when she came back in with her own tray and sat down next to David on the sofa.

The two of them ate slowly and leisurely, taking their time to enjoy their meal. A little way into the meal though David suddenly realised something and swore out loud. “Bugger,” he said, “I’ve forgotten to take my antibiotics.”

At this Mary rolled her eyes in exasperation, before saying, “You spanner, you’ll have to take them after eating but you’ll have to wait an hour or so. On that note though how are you feeling today?”

“I’m feeling fine, a bit stiff and painful but nothing serious. I’ll do my physical therapy after eating.” Saying this he flexed his left arm, wincing ever so slightly as the damaged shoulder protested at the movement.

“Well, wait until you take your antibiotics, and don’t forget our guests will be here in a couple of hours so don’t take too long down there in the gym.” Mary said, a very motherly tone creeping into her voice.

He couldn’t help but smile, “Mary, you seem to be very keen to make sure I don’t forget we’ve got company arriving today. It’s not like that I’d forget is it? Is there something going on that you want to tell me about?”

Her cheeks coloured slightly, gradually turning red as she answered, saying, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Throughout she tried to maintain an innocent expression, which she only just managed to succeed in doing.

For a moment they returned to eating in silence, focusing on the food Mary had cooked, but eventually David broke the silence again. “When does the Director want you back on active duty?” he asked, his voice was slightly wistful, as if he knew the pleasant and peaceful existence he’d been enjoying for the last couple of week was about to end.

“He wants me back in a week’s time, but he wants you back then as well. Why do you ask?” She glanced at him as she said this, and it was clear she’d picked up on the wistful note in David’s voice.

“No real reason,” he replied, “I was just wondering. That and I’ll miss having you here to wait on me hand and foot.”

As he said this, David couldn’t stop a big grin from spreading across his face as Mary reacted with mock outrage. “Well if Sir is going to take that attitude, then I won’t be there for him the next time he lets himself get shot.”

He laughed at that and before long she joined in as he said, “All joking aside, thank you for this. I can think of no one else I’d have rather had here for these last few weeks.”

She just put her arm around him and could only say, “You know I’m always here for you. I’m always prepared to play nurse for you.” He resisted the urge to make a joke about the nurse comment and just smiled. It was moments like this that he remembered that he still had a family even if it wasn’t a conventional one. A fact that he was reminded about when he glanced at the mantelpiece for a moment and saw the get well soon cards. There was one from the Director, Jack had sent two for some reason, Tom had sent one and there was even one from Katya that had been sent from Chechnya How she’d found out he’d been injured, he didn’t know but he was glad of the gesture all the same.

Suddenly Mary removed her arm from around him and stood up, then gathered up both trays and headed back into the kitchen. As she went she said, “You might as well get a wash and get dressed.”

Nodding, even though she couldn’t see him do it, David also got up from his seat and headed upstairs in the direction of the bathroom to get a shower. Once he was out from under the streaming hot jets of water, he got dressed into some sports clothing so he could get on with his physical therapy. Heading back downstairs he next went into the kitchen. Mary was already there, busying herself preparing a full roast for lunch, rather than the usual sandwich or bowl of soup. Manoeuvring his way around his friend, David fished through one of the cupboards until he found a small medicine bottle containing his antibiotics. Opening the bottle he put three into the palm of his hand, filled a glass of water from the tap and took the tablets.

Having taken his antibiotics, he pirouetted his way out of the kitchen and went down to the gym to do some exercises. The gym itself was a start of the art room located underneath the main house and adjacent to the garage. He started off with some weight exercises and moved through a series of exercises that were supposed to help with his recovery.

 An hour passed by in the blink of an eye for him and it felt like only five minutes since he’d started when Mary called down, “David they’ve arrived.” Even as she said it the doorbell rang. “Would you mind opening the door please, I’m just finishing some things in the kitchen,” she finished by saying, her voice growing fainter towards the end of the sentence.

Stopping what he was doing, David left the gym and walked through into the garage before climbing the stairs to the ground floor. He then walked up through to the front door and opened it to reveal Amanda standing on the top step with her parents and siblings behind. Standing aside to let his guests enter, David introduced himself to the rest of the family.

“Hi I’m David,” he said as he shook hands and accepted hugs from the various members of Amanda’s family. At that moment Mary entered the hall and he introduced her as well to the assembled crowd, “and this is Mary.”

Amanda’s mother then chose that moment to make things slightly awkward when she stepped forward and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mary. Aren’t you a bit young to be David’s mum though?”

The pair exchanged looks at the question before he burst into laughter as she explained, “I’m not a relative of David, just a close friend of his. He needed somebody to look after him after the events at the Stock Exchange and I volunteered.”

At that moment, David decided to excuse himself and said, “If you don’t mind I’m just going to get a shower and change. Mary, would you offer everyone drinks and I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

With that he left her to handle the company while he dashed upstairs and quickly got into the shower. After five minutes rinsing off the sweat from his workout he climbed out and briskly dried himself before dressing in a comfortable pair of blue jeans and a plain black T-shirt. Feeling slightly cleaner he walked back downstairs and rejoined everyone in the living room. As he walked in, he saw everyone was seated with a drink and at that moment Mary walked in with a glass of wine in one hand and a beer in the other hand. Smiling, he accepted the beer and took a seat next to Amanda, joining in with the conversation which seemed to be centred on the house. “This house is lovely,” Amanda’s mum was saying, “is it just you living here David?”

He nodded, “Yeah, for a couple of years now. I’m not here much anymore though because of University so it matters less.”

At this Amanda’s dad joined the conversation and said, “What happened to your parents?”

A silence immediately fell over the room and Amanda turned to her father and said, “Dad!” in an exasperated tone. David then surprised everyone however by answering the question, at least in part.

“They died when I was sixteen, it was a home invasion gone wrong. I could have gone to a relative but I’ve never been close to them and they all live quite a way away. Fortunately I was considered old enough by the authorities to continue living here, and my dad’s former employer has kept an eye on me since then.”

For a moment the room was silent as everyone felt slightly awkward at hearing such a personal anecdote. But the mood swiftly lifted as Mary came back into the room and announced lunch was going in the right direction. This jumpstarted the conversation back into life and Amanda’s mum started by asking David how he was enjoying University.

“I’m enjoying myself,” he replied, “keeping out of trouble and only drinking sensible amounts.” As he said this he smiled slightly at the expressions everyone else was wearing. It seemed that his words weren’t what the others expected to hear.

At this Amanda’s mum laughed and said, “Sensible amounts? That not the right attitude for a university student. You should be taking everything to the max like my daughter. In fact from the photographs I’ve seen, I’m surprised I’ve not been introduced to a boyfriend yet.”

Everyone laughed at that, not only because of what had been said but also because of Amanda’s resulting expression. It was a mixture of shock, embarrassment and slight outrage with crossed arms, bright red cheeks and pursed lips.

Fortunately Mary saved her from further embarrassment by choosing that moment to join the conversation. Perching on the arm of the sofa to David’s left, she said, “The trick of course is to strike the balance between fun and work, especially now with the cost of tuition being so high. It’s useless to spend three years and tens of thousands of pounds on a degree and not get it. I remember my time at Uni. I had a great time, got with loads of guys and got drunk most nights. But I then had to work harder to make sure when I left I had my first.”

At this David couldn’t help but laugh and as all eyes turned to him he explained, “I’m sorry but I’d never have figured Mary for such a wild child. At work she’s a model employee and her superiors absolutely love her because she’s so reliable. Hearing about this new side of her is a surprise.”

She looked at him with mock outrage and said, “Well I’d rather be considered reliable than not. I seem to remember that everyone considers you as a last resort to work with. Something to do with the very blunt and the in your face, way you work.”

At this he just laughed and said, “I’m going to miss this when I go back to Uni. You’re always such fun to talk to.”

“Likewise,” she replied, a very faint hint of sadness in her voice, like she didn’t want him to go, “Oh and sorry to lower the mood but I got a call from Jack. Something’s changed at the office and we need to go in tomorrow. It sounded serious we should get there early.”

At this Amanda’s mum asked the obvious question, “So what is it that you two actually do? I’m assuming David that you just work on a part time basis over the holidays?”

David glanced quickly at Mary, and Amanda, before turning to Amanda’s mum and giving her an answer that would head off further questioning or so he hoped. With a very casual smile fixed on his face, he said, “We just work in a bog standard office. I do lots of holiday work and there sometimes do some remote stuff from university. For some reason they value my opinion and they often ask for my help on specific issues that they have.”

Amanda’s mum seemed to accept this answer and further awkward questions were forestalled by Mary announcing that lunch was very nearly ready and suggested that everyone sat up at the table. David showed them through to the dining room then helped her bring the food through. While they were alone in the kitchen, he couldn’t help but ask, “What exactly did Jack say?”

She took a moment to reply as she hurried through the kitchen gathering bowls of food together to go onto the table. Eventually she turned to him though and said, “He didn’t say much. Just that something’s happened and we both need to be there tomorrow. I thought it sounded like they’ve got something new for us connected to the Stock Exchange, that’s the only reason I can think of for you needing to go in.”

Further comment became impossible moments later as David was handed a couple of dishes full of food and sent to take them through and set them on the table where Amanda and her family were already seated. It wasn’t long before the table was covered with sliced pieces of pork, various vegetables, gravy and many more things besides.

Once David and Mary had then taken their seats, everyone quickly began to load their plates with food. For a moment there was only the sound of eating as they all concentrated intently on the feast Mary had prepared for them.

After a good half an hour of eating David and Mary had both finished and the others weren’t far behind. He decided therefore that it was time to break the deathly silence. “Lovely food Mary,” he said, smiling brightly, “we should definitely eat like that more often.”

She smiled at the compliment as she replied, “Well you haven’t got long to enjoy my cooking before I have to get back to work and you’ll be left to fend for yourself.”

“Hey you can’t leave me on my own, I’m the invalid here,” he said back, interjecting a slightly pathetic tone into his voice that had everyone around the table smiling.

“You’re the one that decided to get shot. I can’t be expected to put my life on hold every time you get yourself injured,” she answered back, mock indignation in her voice as she wagged a finger at him across the table.

He just laughed and said, “And yet you’re good enough to do so anyway. You know that I’m always grateful to have you watching my back.”

As Amanda’s family observed their playful conversation, and laughed along when it seemed appropriate, it was clear just how close the pair were. It was a connection that seemed to be as strong as between siblings and Amanda couldn’t help wondering if Mary had lied to her when she said there had been nothing between her and David.

After the meal she got the opportunity to ask the man himself what the truth was as she helped him clear the dishes away. They were in the kitchen together when she got the nerve up to ask and said, “Hey David, what’s the deal with you and Mary? It seems like you two are much closer than just friends.”

This suggestion caused him to break down into laughter but on seeing Amanda’s confused expression he managed to control himself enough to give her the answer. Turning to face her, he leant against the counter behind him and said, “We are closer than friends. Mary treats me like her baby brother and I look at her as a sister. She and Jack are the closest things I have to family; apart from them I have nobody. It’s also thanks to Mary that I met you.”

At this Amanda looked quizzical so he explained. “There was a time when I considered not going to university at all and just work full time. When I suggested that idea to her, she convinced me to at apply to Uni and then made me promise to go if I got my grades.”

“It must be nice to have someone like that, not just someone you’re close to but someone you trust so completely.” Amanda smiled as she said this, realising just how strong the connection between the pair was. It was clear Mary adored David, and it was equally obvious that the reverse was just as true.

He smiled back at her and said, “Yeah, it’s nice to be able to rely on someone like I rely on Mary. I know she’s always got my back and will look after me no matter what. But surely you have someone you trust like that.”

“My mum,” was her immediate answer and David nodded in understanding. He’d guessed as much from the way Amanda and her mum interacted together.

“Come on David,” Amanda’s voice suddenly broke through his thoughts, “we’d better be getting back to the company or else they’ll think we’re up to something.”

He smiled at that and point out, “What on earth could they possibly think we’re up to?”

She just laughed. “I’m sure Mary’s fertile imagination could come up with several scenarios.”

“Point taken,” he managed to say while laughing, “we’d better get back before she leaps to a smutty suggestion.”

This had them both laughing uncontrollably which drew questioning looks from the rest of the company when they rejoined them in the living room. It took several minutes for their laughter to eventually subside, during which time they were completely incapable of offering any explanation for their joviality.

Unfortunately it was then Amanda’s mum announced that they had to be leaving as they had a family engagement to get to later that evening. So less than an hour later, roughly the time it took for everyone to have a last cup of tea, David was warmly hugging Amanda goodbye and waving her car as it drove down the gravel lane and out of sight.

Walking back inside, he looked at his watch and saw it was nearly four o’clock in the afternoon, so he decided to go down to the gym and do some more physical therapy. He figured that the sooner he was one hundred percent the better, as he doubted he was being asked to come into the office tomorrow so the Director could see how he was recovering. There were regular phone calls from Mary for that.

For the rest of the afternoon David and Mary saw little of each other as they occupied themselves in a variety of ways. He worked in the gym, while she did some housework before joining him briefly. He left not long after though as he shoulder and side were bothering him and headed upstairs to have a soothing bath that relaxed his muscles and dulled the pain from his injuries. After a long soak he went and got changed into a pair of loose tracksuits and a random T-shirt.

By then it was nearly six in the evening so he headed into the kitchen and turned the oven on as it was his turn to cook. Opening up the fridge he decided it was pizza for tea and while organised everything in the kitchen, Mary, now showered and also changed, selected a film for them to watch.

When the food was ready he brought through both plates and they sat on the sofa, watching the film as they ate, before turning in to bed early. His shoulder and side still hurt him and they wanted to be punctual when leaving in the morning. They both wanted to get there early so that they could find out just what was going on, and why they were needed so much earlier than they expected.

Chapter 21

The next morning both of them were up early and by eight o’clock they were in the DB9, heading for Headquarters. As Mary drove, David wondered aloud why he’d been asked to come in as well but all she could say in way of an answer was, “There has to be a reason but before we hear Jack’s explanation there’s no use guessing about it.”

Silently agreeing her, David didn’t bother to broach the subject again during the drive, which was fortunately stress free with only a little traffic on the road. It all allowed them to arrive at the Headquarters building in good time. As they arrived though it was clear something had happened. At the front of the building and the entrance to the garage there were armed guards in what looked like police uniform. It was the kind of visible security he’d never seen before at the headquarters building. Normally the security in the building was very low key to reduce the chances of anyone thinking it was anything other than a corporate headquarters.

There were guards even in the underground garage and they even checked the Aston very thoroughly for any kind of threat, and David and Mary were subjected to searches before they were allowed into the building. Finally though they were clear of the security and parked the car before heading to the lifts that led up to the main building.

As they walked, David considered the implications of the changes. They hinted that something was desperately wrong and he couldn’t help but connect it with his own presence in the building. Rather than guess as to what had happened however, he decided to get it straight from Jack, who was sure to know what was going on.

Taking the lift up to the fourth floor, they went straight to Jack’s office where they found him sitting at his desk pouring over reports and looking very worried indeed. Looking up as the pair entered, his face immediately showed alarm and relief, as David greeted him.

“Hi Jack,” he said, sitting down on the other side of the desk, “what’s gone on here? There’s loads of extra security and you’re looking like you haven’t slept since the Stock Exchange mission ended?”

“Not here David,” was the rather brusque reply Jack gave, “the Director wants to see you upstairs now, both of you. I’ll be there in a minute.”

With that he ushered them out of the office and closed the door, leaving them to head to the Director’s office alone. They walked quickly, whatever was going on it was clearly urgent, and the atmosphere in the building was tense. It seemed that everyone they came across was hurrying somewhere, looking tired, harassed and overworked and normally with a stack of paperwork clutched in their arms.

It didn’t take long to reach the lobby where they found things even stranger. The lobby was completely deserted except for several guards, all armed, and the normal receptionists manning the desk controlling access to the lift to the Director’s office.

Passing through the, David felt the eyes of the guards and receptionists fixed on him as he hurried towards the lift and allowed it to take him to the man who seemed to have all the answers. As the lift arrived at the top floor he stepped out first, followed by Mary, and walked purposefully to the leather clad office door in front of him. Rather than knock, he did his normal thing and thrust the door open and strode in. As he walked in his attention was fixed, as always, on the man behind the desk. As usual the Director didn’t look surprised at the rather abrupt entrance of his guests.

“Come in David, we have a lot to talk about I’m afraid,” the Director said, his voice sounding as tired as Jack’s. As David sat, he also though that the older man seemed older than the last time he’d seen him.

He was impatient for answers however and got right to the point, saying, “What’s going on here? This place seems to be under threat of attack considering all of the guards.”

The Director rubbed his brow wearily at that and said, “The truth is we are under attack. Yesterday a letter arrived here, the sender was unknown but it was addressed to you,” at this point he looked at David very pointedly.

This had David very confused which showed in his voice as he said, “How is that possible? No one knows about my connection to The Department, and only the highest placed officials even know it exists.” What was said next in answer to this question gave David an idea of just how serious this situation was.

“We don’t know how it’s possible,” the Director admitted with resignation in his voice as if he’d been trying to find out that information for weeks to no avail, “but the fact that it was sent at all had alarm bells ringing for us. We opened it in a controlled environment, and while there was nothing dangerous in the envelope, what was inside was just as bad. It was a short message written in Arabic but we had it translated and...”

The Director paused for a moment and seemed reluctant to continue but David pressed him for more information and asked, “What did it say?”

The question was delivered bluntly, and the Director realised he wanted an answer there and then. So he put aside his own personal reservations and said, “The message was a sentence of execution against you. A sentence pronounced on you by a group called the ‘Brigade of the Faithful’, they also claimed responsibility for the Stock Exchange attack.”

“So it seems they weren’t too impressed with me putting a stop to the attack,” David said, a ghost of a smile on his face.

But that smile was quickly wiped off his face by the next thing told to him by the Director who said, “Displeased is an understatement, the same day the letter arrived, your office was blown up. Two agents were killed in the blast; they had the bad fortunate to be passing it at the time and were effectively shredded by the glass. Another six were sent to the hospital with various injuries from light burns to broken bones and lacerations.”

“Christ,” David said, the smile well and truly gone at the news, “how can they know so much though. Few enough people even know the Department exists so how did these guys manage to get our address as well?”

“We don’t know,” the Director conceded, “we have no leads and there’s nothing in the letter that suggests how they came by this information. All we do know is that we’re under attack, so our priority now is destroying this group and dealing with them once and for all.”

David and Mary remained silent as the Director finished speaking. For David, the feeling that he’d caused such devastation and that two agents were dead because of him was indescribably awful. As the silence stretched on he gazed at his feet and his thoughts went back to the day his parents had died. He had failed to protect them then, and now he hadn’t been there to protect the Department.

Eventually though he looked up from his shoelaces and looked the Director in the eye. The gaze he fixed the older man with sent a shudder caused a shudder and for the Director the room suddenly felt ten degrees colder. Then he recognised that stare as the same one he’d seen in David’s eyes when his parent’s had died, it was completely emotionless and terrifyingly cold and he knew what David was about to say.

“Let me go,” he said.

The Director shook his head however and said sharply, “No, you’re not fully healed and this entire group is hunting for your blood. I’m assembling a team to deal with this but they can’t be watching out for you the entire time. You’re going to a safe house until this is all over, somewhere I can be sure you’ll be safe and out of the way.”

David shook his head vehemently at that and protested, saying, “No way am I sitting on the sidelines. It’s me they want and I’m responsible for the deaths of those agents. Their families will never know why they died, but at least I can personally make sure those responsible pay. For other men and women to step into the line of fire when there’s no reason for me not to, that’s unacceptable.”

“I don’t care what’s acceptable,” the Director burst out, an angry undertone clear in his voice, “I just care about keeping you safe. It’s what I promised your parents I’d do and I intend to keep that promise. I will not let you go after this group, it’s too dangerous.”

This sudden outburst took David by surprise and he couldn’t help but look at Mary in shock, before then turning back to the Director. For a moment he opened and closed with mouth silently as he tried to think of something to say about this revelation.

Before he could say anything however the Director, his voice calmer, said, “Agent Hall, could you wait outside for a moment, I need to speak with Ryder in private for a moment.”

Nodding Mary stood up and left, but not before patting David on the shoulder in a clear sign of support. Once the door had closed behind her however, he turned back to the old man in front of him, and stared at him, waiting for the explanation to his unspoken question.

Chapter 22

“Yes I knew your parents,” the Director eventually said, “I worked with your father on several occasions early in his career and he was one of my best agents when I became Director. In fact you’re every bit the agent he was and you command the same loyalty from your colleagues as he did. I’ve noticed how Agents Hall and Stirling stand by you no matter what.”

David suddenly interrupted the Director in mid flow and while keeping his tone respectful asked a question that had just occurred to him, “You said you promised my parents you’d keep me safe, but you were the one who blackmailed me into working for The Department. How was that keeping me safe? In the two and a half years I’ve been working for The Department I’ve broken several bones, been shot four times, stabbed twice and blown up.”

At this the Director’s face began to show every year of his age and a further decade added onto that. For the first time David saw the full weight of every decision he had made since taking up his position. Eventually he said, in a tired voice, “I thought the best way to keep you safe was to have you in The Department. That way I knew you’d have the skills to confront any dangers that might come and I could keep a close eye on you. It seemed the easiest way at the time. It’s something I’ll have to ask your parents’ forgiveness for though.”

David’s face registered shock at this. No matter what had happened to him he’d never imagined that the Director regretted anything, let alone his recruitment. “So why not let me live a normal life?” he said, a hint of anger in his voice, “why continue calling me up?”

“Because I’ve noticed that your outlook on the job has changed,” was the reply, “When I blackmailed you into joining you were determined to hate everything about it. But since then I’ve seen how you look forward to every mission, despite your complaints about the sudden calls. I know that you’ve noticed the difference you can make to people’s lives. I haven’t let you go because I know you’d miss it.”

At this David opened his mouth, determined to argue with this, but then he realised he couldn’t. Everything the Director had said was correct, he had started off hating the job but he did now see the difference he made and he would miss the job if he were suddenly to be let go and returned to a normal life. Knowing he couldn’t refute what had been said, he tried a different tack instead. Looking the Director in the eye he said, “I never realised that you were keeping such a close eye on me these last few years. But no matter what you promised my parents you know that I’m the best person for this job. At sixteen I’d proved myself as capable as any SAS trooper, now this terror group had declared war on me and by failing in their attempt they’ve declared war on The Department. You know I’m the best chance we have to win this war.”

As David finished speaking he saw he’d struck a chord with the Director, who appeared to seriously consider allowing him to have his way. But before he answered, the Director asked just one question of the young man in front of him. “Are you fit enough for this? I’m not going to send you out to die.”

David nodded, it was a reasonable question, and said, “I’m good sir, and I’m ready for this.”

The Director continued to think for a moment, before finally giving David the answer he had been hoping for and said, “Fine, you can go. But you’ll have to prove you’re one hundred percent, you’ll have to take a series of tests and if you pass, and when we have the intelligence sorted, I’ll send you on the hunt. In the meantime you stay at the safe house, understood?”

David thought about arguing over the tests for a moment, but he realised that if he did so the Director would never let him go, so instead he simply said, “Okay.”

Satisfied and smiling slightly although it just made him look weary, the Director pressed a button on his desk and said, “Agent Hall? You can come back in and bring Agent Stirling with you please.”

The door immediately opened and Mary walked in followed by Jack who had managed to compose himself since earlier and was now looking slightly less stressed. “Agent Stirling, have you got the files?” the Director asked as Jack stood in front of the desk, leaving Mary to take the other chair

“Yes sir, I’ve gone through them and the initial conclusions make it a lead worth following,” Jack answered, putting the files he’d brought in onto the desk.

At this David sat up straighter in his chair, his interest piqued and asked, “What have you found, Jack?”

Jack looked at the Director for a moment, looking for permission which was granted when he was given a single nod. Turning back to face David, he took the top file off the pile and gave it to him. He opened it as Jack said, “We went through the militants’ personal effects off the bodies, and we ran their records. There wasn’t much special, a couple were career criminals the others between them only had an assault charge that was dropped and a couple of drunk and disorderly fines. Then we caught a break.”

Jack fell silent for a moment as he caught his breath, having been speaking at break neck speed, but even so David’s impatience meant he immediately said, “What was the break?”

Taking a deep breath, Jack carried on with his story and said, “A couple of the guys had parking violations on their records. They were dated in the last couple of days and they were for different streets next to each other so we pulled all the CCTV footage we could. We found images of them arriving at a warehouse constantly over the two weeks before the attack.”

“I take it you’ve checked out the warehouse then?” David asked, desperate to get the facts as quickly as possible.

“Of course,” Jack replied, “it was deserted when we got there but we went over the entire place with a fine tooth comb. We didn’t find much, just some blood in one corner that was from an MI5 agent that went missing over a month ago.”

David interrupted again at that and said, “That doesn’t sound like much of a break to me. In fact it sounds more like a dead end.”

Jack wasn’t deterred though and continued to tell the full story, saying, “We thought so too but then we noticed the shell company that had bought the warehouse was renting a house elsewhere in the city, and that property turned out to be a goldmine. It seemed to be where the group was staying in the build up to their attack and we found plenty that they left behind. The best thing was a laptop that seemed to have been used by the guy who shot you. The hard drive was wiped but we managed to recover most of the information.”

“Was there anything useful on it?” David asked, still not quite seeing where the amazing break was in Jack’s story.

“Loads,” was the reply, “it’s a high end model that had a GPS transponder on it. When we contacted the service provider we found it had been all over the place. It also suggested that there was another location in London that we need to be looking at, and that might have more information to lead us to the main group.”

At that David finally saw what his friend was excited about and opened his mouth to speak, but before he could utter a single syllable the Director interjected, saying to him, “No. I’m not risking you on this raid; I’ll send a team of other agents to check it out. Understood?”

David nodded, he realised it made sense, he certainly wasn’t at full fitness yet and it was senseless to risk his life unnecessarily. Meanwhile the Director had turned back to Jack and was giving him a series of instructions. “Agent Stirling, I’m placing you in command of the operation against this other cell.” As Jack nodded in understanding, the Director went on to say, “you can have anyone you want and whatever equipment and vehicles you require. This is a priority, hit this location, locate any new intelligence and bring anyone you find there in for interrogation, hard arrests only, we need them alive. Understood?”

“Yes sir,” Jack answered, before turning and leaving the office to organisation the operation.

As Jack left, the Director turned to Mary and said, “Agent Hall, I also have a task for you, I have decided to grant Ryder’s request for point duty on tracking and eliminating the threat posed by this terrorist group. He will need a lot of support on this operation so I’ve decided that since you two work together so well, you will be his connection with us. Whatever he needs, you’ll provide and whatever new leads we learn on this end you’ll pass on. Are you alright with this?”

Mary looked surprise for a moment. She’d never been asked if a particular assignment was alright, instead she’d been told what to do and she’d done it without question. It took a couple of moments therefore until she regained her voice and managed to say, “Of course, I’d be happy to do it.”

With that the Director turned back to David and gave his final instructions. “That’s all sorted then and you have your support team set up. The only thing left to do is get you into the safe house. I’ve taken the liberty of sending a team to your house to pack some bags for you and they’ll then go straight to your destination so your things will be meeting you there. Now if you head to the garage you’ll find a car waiting for you, the Aston Martin is too high profile, it’ll take you straight to the safe house. I’ll join you there in a couple of days. This building is too obvious now they know where to find us so we’re moving everyone out until this crisis is resolved. Fortunately we have several contingency sites for our agents to work from, set up for a crisis like this.”

David nodded; he’d agreed to move into the safe house temporarily so he couldn’t argue with that part anyway, and got up. Heading towards the door, he paused for a moment and said, “By the way Sir, thank you, and for the record you were right on all counts.” Then he opened the door and left the office, Mary following on behind.

Once the lift had deposited the pair on the ground floor they moved quickly to the closest lift that would take them down to the garage. It then took them a minute to locate the black saloon car waiting for them, driver behind the wheel and engine idling. Wasting no time at all they got in the back of the car and as soon as the doors were closed, the driver pressed the accelerator and set off.

As they sat in the back in silence, David wondered where the safe house was. Meanwhile Mary spent the trip pondering what the Director might have said to him and how he had convinced the Director to let him take point on hunting down the rest of the terrorist group. Whatever they thought during that journey to the safe house, neither of them could have predicted what the next few weeks would bring.

hapter 23

As the car pulled up to the gates, David looked out of his window to get his first look at the safe house. It was an imposing manor house just outside London surrounded by walls and security guards covering the entire area. As the car approached the front of the house, he saw guards covering every angle of the approach; clearly their safety was considering something of a priority.

Getting out of the car, he ignored the guards patrolling the grounds and walked straight up the stone stairs and into the house. Pausing for a moment just inside the door he took a moment to get his bearings. In front of him was a large staircase that led up to the upper floors of the house. To the right there appeared to be what passed for a living room, although it was more monumental than any other living room he’d ever seen. To the left there was a combined library and office with shelves of books around the walls and a desk to one side, facing into the room with its back to the window facing into the grounds.

At that point he was intercepted by one of the guards before he could move anywhere else. “Excuse me Sir,” the man said, “would you be Agents Ryder and Hall?”

As David and Mary both nodded in answer to his question the man held out a hand and introduced himself, saying, “I’m Agent Smith, formerly Sergeant Major in the Grenadier Guards. I’m in charge of security here. The Director called ahead and asked me to get you settled in your rooms. He also asked me to convey to you, Agent Ryder, that your tests are set for two days time. Now let me show you to your rooms.”

With that the formidable Agent Smith led the way up the stairs up to the second floor of the house. As they climbed David examined the man closely, he was clearly a career soldier with his salt and pepper hair cut short, but more than that it was the man’s aura that spoke about his military service. He walked with a confidence and assuredness that made it seem like he’d be able to face any threat down.

By the time David had finished his examination of Smith, they’d arrived at the top of the stairs. Turning right and walking two third of the way along the corridor, Smith stopping in front of a door, turned to David and said, “Agent Ryder this is you. Agent Hall is across the hall. I’ll leave you two to get yourselves sorted; your bags arrived half an hour ago and are already inside. When you’re hungry ring down to the kitchen and they’ll put something together for you. If you need anything, just let me or one of the other agents know.”

With that Smith left them and headed back downstairs. After only a moment’s pause David took the initiative and opened the door to his room as behind him Mary did the same. Walking in, he saw that he’d been given a nice spacious area, with an ensuite bathroom and a huge king sized double bed. Smiling to himself, he idly thought that perhaps things wouldn’t be too bad for the couple of days he would be staying there.

Two days later though and his bright outlook had evaporated. He’d ended up cooped up in the house for the entirety of both days and as a result boredom had entirely set in and he was now sure he was developing cabin fever. The only things available to do were either read books from the library or burn off steam in the shooting range under the house and the gym. Neither were enough to burn off all of the energy accumulated during nearly two full weeks indoors already. If that wasn’t bad enough by the end of the first day he’d quickly found that most of the titles in the library weren’t normal light reading. The only thing that kept him going was the thought that he was taking the tests that day and after that he’d be back in the field, until then he’d known he’d have to just grin and bear it. What he didn’t know though, was that those two days had been very productive as far as leads had gone.

A small army of analysts had been going over the various electronic devices found at the London house. Most of it hadn’t been connected to the ‘Brigade of the Faithful’ a couple of possible leads had been found. The man who’d been behind the scenes had covered his tracks well and the few hints that had been found wouldn’t lead anywhere without other information. Things had been slightly more promising from the other location Agent Stirling had raided the day David had been brought to the safe house.

It had been immediately apparent that the activities at the building, which turned out to be another warehouse, hadn’t been directly connected to the ‘Brigade of the Faithful’. But after running the names of all the detainees through the police computer it became clear they weren’t wholly on the wrong track. All of the individuals who’d been brought in for interrogation turned out to be key individuals suspected of running one of the largest arms rings in the Capital. To Jack, that suggested that the men might be responsible for arming the terrorists.

He’d interrogated the criminals thoroughly, leaving no stone unturned although in actuality it proved easier than he expected. After it became clear the Department agents were willing to use violence to get the answers they wanted, the criminals folded quickly and happily spilled their guts.

Over the course of successive questioning a suspect began to appear. He was described as well built, tanned skin and he spoke English with a very slight Middle Eastern accent. The customer was also described as seeming ruthless and sadistic, savagely beating one of the men’s associates merely for bumping into him.

Meanwhile the men’s computers and laptops, all of which had been confiscated, were also providing dividends. From a cache of emails on one of the computers the analysts had discovered a link to the account found on the laptop from Afghanistan. From the emails they’d uncovered a treasure trove of information, including a possible name for the enemy.

In one email, there was an odd paragraph that said the leader was a man ‘given of god’. From the context of the paragraph though this seemed odd phraseology and the analysts soon worked out it was a translation error. The word was actually a name, Nathaniel, and it joined the description of the man in the dossier being compiled.

However there hadn’t been success on all fronts, despite repeated attempts to get him to talk, the biggest potential source of information, the man David had knocked unconscious, was refusing to say a word. It had been weeks since his incarceration had begun and despite trying everything the interrogators had failed to get anything out of him, so they’d stopped trying while they tried to work out what else to do.

 Not knowing any of this, the third day at the safe house began like the previous two for David. He woke up early and considered how bored he was and how much he wanted to be out on the hunt. Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by Mary, who’d stuck her head around the door.

“Hiya,” she said, “I’m heading down to the range if you want to come with? I heard that you’re not starting the tests for another hour so I thought you’d like to take your mind off it.”

He smiled, he was just sitting in front of the window to his room, staring into the gardens, and any chance of a distraction was very welcome. “Sure, let’s go,” he said before leaping up and heading towards the door as she disappeared off down the corridor.

He knew she was as bored and fed up as he was with being cooped up in the house. The only difference was she had another few weeks of dealing with it. He meanwhile expected to be gone within a week at the most. This train of thought occupied his mind right up to the firing range where he forced himself to focus on the task at hand.

The range itself was impressive with a veritable armoury located in a wire mesh cage to one side and then eight firing lanes next to it. Walking in, they both stood in front of the wire cage for a moment as they considered what to fire. Mary chose first, selecting a Sig Sauer P228 from a series of handguns on the left hand side of the cage. David meanwhile took a little longer to make his choice. Ideally he would have selected a Browning, which was the weapon he was most used to despite the fact there were several better weapons he could choose. As he looked though, he wasn’t surprised to see no Browning on the rack and with the nearest equivalent, the Sig, gone he had to select something else.

In the end he chose a Glock 17, the new standard sidearm of the British Army and a well thought of weapon around the world. Hefting the black pistol in his hands, he took a moment to test the balance before picking up a magazine and slid it into the butt of the weapon. Walking through to a firing station, he placed the pistol on a small table and donned a pair of ear defenders and protective glasses.

He picked up the pistol, and sighted up the paper target at the end of the range. Once he had the target square in his sights, he took off the trigger safety and just let loose, emptying the entire magazine in a few short moments of loud explosions. Putting the safety back on, he collected his target and examined his handiwork. All seventeen rounds from the Glock had hit the target. Ten had produced a ragged hole in the chest area and five rounds had made a ragged hole in the forehead of the target and two were positioned roughly where the eyes of a real person would have been.

Now in full flow, he went back to the weapon cage, replaced the Glock for an MP5 submachine gun. Putting up another target, he loaded the sub machine gun and sighted up on the target, flipped the weapon into semi automatic and fired fifteen rounds quickly. All of them struck the target in the head. He then flipped the weapon into automatic and fired several control bursts into the target’s chest.

After nearly an hour, several hundred rounds of ammunition and several weapons, he was interrupted away from blasting at the paper targets by one of the guards. After waiting for him to put the safety back on the M4 assault rifle he’d been using, the agent said, “Agent Ryder? They’re waiting upstairs for you, so they can start. If you’d follow me please I’ll take you to them?”

With that David was quickly led from the firing range into the library where the Director, and several other people were sitting, evidently waiting for him to arrive. Walking into the room he took a moment to examine the three men and the woman who’d be assessing him. While he couldn’t be sure which was which, he did know there’d be a firearms assessor, a psychologist and doctor and a fitness assessor. Then he smiled broadly at the assembled company and said, “Well which test is first then.”

“They want to test your physical abilities first seeing as you were shot only a couple of weeks ago,” the Director said, as one of the men stood up and nodded to David, who in turn examined the man.

He was tall and lean with the perfect runner’s physique. In short he looked like the perfect person to be assessing David’s fitness. Nodding back, David said, “I’ll just change then,” and walked out before getting an answer.

Hurrying upstairs he quickly changed into some sports clothes before heading back downstairs to find the assessor waiting for him at the bottom of the staircase. As he joined the man, he headed off towards the gym and David followed on behind, neither offering nor receiving conversation as both men walked in complete silence.

It didn’t take long to reach the gym which was underground and adjacent to the firing range and when they did the assessor turned to David and finally spoke. Standing in the centre of the room he said, “Right, we want to see whether your injuries have had an effect on your physical fitness so the task is simple. You get on the treadmill and run as hard as you can for as long as you can. When you can’t go any further, you stop. I have your previous fitness scores from your annual assessments so I’ll be able to see whether there’s been a significant shortfall in your performance. Start in your own time.”

With that the assessor stepped back and David, ignoring him, hopped onto the treadmill and began to run. Starting off at a fairly relaxed pace, he initially ran for five minutes at ten kilometres an hour before upping the pace to twelve which he held for a further five minutes. After those first ten minutes he was still feeling fresh, if slightly breathless, so he upped the pace again to fourteen kilometres an hour. Immediately though that pace began to make itself felt and he knew that he wouldn’t be able to set the pace any higher, so he focused on maintaining that pace for as long as possible.

After five minutes at fourteen David was feeling devoid of breath, he couldn’t physically fill his lungs quickly enough to satisfy his oxygen needs, and after ten minutes he was beginning to flag and knew it was only a matter of time before he collapsed. Refusing to give up however he ignored the complaints from his body and pressed on, determined to keep going. By now his muscles were protesting and the movement of his arms had the injury to his shoulder flaring up in pain, but he continued to pay it no heed and held the gruelling pace.

After twelve minutes at fourteen however he knew he was in trouble and decided discretion was the better part of valour. Hitting the stop button on the treadmill, he allowed himself to slowly come to a stop, feeling the eyes of the assessor on him the entire time as his muscles screamed at the abuse they’d been put through. Once the machine was stopped entirely, he turned to the assessor and said, “Well?” in between great gulps of air.

The assessor merely smiled and said, “Unfortunately you won’t know your results until the end of all of the tests. Let’s return to the library and you can crack on with the next one.” With that he left the gym, and with no other choice David followed on behind, still breathing heavily despite his best efforts to control his breathing and bring it back down to normal. Fortunately by the time they reached the library, he’d managed to regain control over his breathing and was ready to face the next two tests. These he quickly found out were going to be in the library and back to back as he was given his medical and psychological evaluations.

Walking into the library alone, the fitness assessor had remained outside, he saw the doctor was first and walked over, taking the chair offered to him gratefully. Fortunately the medical exam was nice and short. She asked to see David’s injuries and after examining them closely declared that the injuries were healing nicely and should be fine as long as he didn’t stress himself too much. Then the doctor left and the psychologist entered, carrying a clipboard and several cards.

This assessment took a full hour and mainly consisted of David being asked questions, some of them seemingly idiotic and looking at ink blots on cards and describing what he saw. By the end his head hurt and he was sure he’d not impressed his assessor, but he didn’t care because there was now just his shooting assessment left.

He met the assessor in the firing range and was handed the Sig before being told to fire at the target until the magazine was empty. This he did rapidly, hitting the target all fifteen times in the chest. Then the exercise changed and he was told to transfer his fire as quickly as possible between three targets, firing at each target only as many times as it would take to make a kill. This he achieved in three shots, each one a headshot. This seemed to surprise the instructor who then tried him out on a variety of other weapons before declaring the test over.

With that David returned to the library to hear his results from the assessors and see whether he’d done enough to be allowed back into the field and escape from the house that had become something like a prison. As he entered the library he saw the assessors all sat down with the Director and Mary also in attendance. Taking the last spare seat, he sat down and waited.

Chapter 24

He wasn’t kept waiting for long and moments after he’d sat down, the Director said, “Okay gentlemen let’s hear how he did.”

The fitness assessor went first and gave the Director a piece of paper before saying, “While there was a noticeable performance shortfall in Agent Ryder’s fitness, in my opinion it’s not significant enough to bar him from field duty. I’m confident that he can cope with anything he’s likely to face in performing his duty.”

Resisting the urge to smile, David kept his attention on the room as the doctor was called upon for her opinion and she also cleared him for duty, saying, “Agent Ryder is healing well. He might not be fully healed but he certainly seems able to withstand the general rigours of field duty, although I have made it clear he’s not to over exert himself too much.”

Things began to go wrong for him when the psychologist was asked to speak however. He hadn’t taken a liking to the man during their session anyway but what the man said lowered David’s opinion of him even further. Sitting forward the man said, “In my opinion Agent Ryder displays a very blasé attitude towards his duty. He seems to have little regard for the danger he might be placed in and he seems to have unresolved issues relating to the deaths of his parents. Furthermore he seems to be devoid of emotional control, by his own admission he reacts by instinct and feeling rather than rationally considering the impacts of his actions. As a result I cannot clear him for duty and instead recommend he undergo a full psychological evaluation and therapy.”

For a moment there was silence in the library, David had gone white with shock and anger while the attention of everyone else was split three ways between the psychologist, David and the Director. Fortunately the sudden tension was quickly relieved by the firearms assessor who gave his report without being asked to and said, “Agent Ryder went through a variety of shooting exercises and he performed faultlessly. As a result I can clear him for active service.”

With all of the reports given, David knew his fate lay with the Director. He just hoped the psychologist’s report wouldn’t count more than the three positive reports he’d been given. Eventually the man everyone was waiting for broke the silence and said, “Thank you, gentleman for your reports. In light of the evidence you’ve provided, coupled with my own experience of Agent Ryder’s personality and abilities, I feel that there’s no significant reason to prevent him from returning to active duty.”

As the Director said this, David breathed a silent, internal breath of relief, before smiling broadly. He, along with everyone else, knew that the comment about his personality was a direct snub to the psychologist. In effect the Director was saying that he trusted David to get the job done regardless of professional opinion. For a moment the atmosphere in the room became awkward as everybody glanced at the psychologist through the corner of their eyes, to see him staring at the Director looking slightly put out. But he was a professional and said nothing regarding the decision, he’d given his opinion and it had been disagreed with, that was no grounds to cause a scene though so he left the room, followed by the other assessors and leaving David and Mary in their seats.

For a moment the two of them were kept waiting for the Director to continue, and after another look at the reports the assessors had left with him, he looked up and said, “Well Agent Ryder, good news on your tests, so let’s get down to business. Agent Stirling and his team have investigated the other London location and found the men who armed the terrorists at the Stock Exchange. They also retrieved a large quantity of electronic intelligence and currently we have a large team of analysts working on that, trying to find leads that might lead us to the activities of the ‘Brigade of the Faithful’ overseas.”

“Is there anything about the individual commanding this group?” David asked, hoping that there was more specific information regarding that topic than locating the group.

“As a matter of fact we do,” the Director said, smiling in spite of himself as it was an important milestone for the investigation, “we have a description and a first name. Not the most exhaustive dossier so far but it’s much better than nothing and we’re looking for new leads to build up these dossiers all the time. Unfortunately we have no indication of the man’s current location and so far we have nothing that might lead us to that information.”

For a moment the Director paused, giving David the opportunity to say, “How long is it before we can expect hard intelligence for the next target?”

The Director smiled slightly at that, he’d expected that after three weeks of being cooped up indoors, David would be eager to get out and start the hunt. Then he picked up a thin file that he’d left on the desk and held it out to David. Getting up he took the file and opened it, seeing a picture of the man he’d knocked out on the first page. As he looked up with a confused expression on his face, the Director said, “He’s currently our best source of information but he’s refusing to talk. We need to break him if we want any new leads in the next couple of days. Think you can handle that?”

David nodded in answer then asked, “Where is he?”

“He’s currently in a detention house not far from here. I’ve already arranged for you to be taken there. Break him if you can, we need to know what he does and we need to know it now.” As the Director said this David stood back up and nodded his understanding before leaving the library. Outside there was a car waiting for him, exactly as the Director had said and as he got into the front passenger seat the driver pulled away without a word.

A ten minute drive later and the car pulled into the detention house, which had security just as tight as that at the safe house. The car didn’t stop until it arrived at the front door where David got out and found a welcoming committee waiting for him. Neither he nor the agent standing at the door bothered to exchange pleasantries as David reached the top of the stairs, he wasn’t there for a social visit, and the agent simply turned and led him inside without a word.

From the outside the building looked very similar to the safe house with architecture reminiscent of a Victorian building but inside the similarities with the safe house ended. Instead of plush surroundings everything was very spartan and utilitarian and David found himself guided down the stairs to an underground interrogation room. Inside there was a steel table bolted into the concrete floor, featureless concrete walls painted white and two metal chairs. Other than that there was nothing in the room apart from a single camera in the corner facing the door with a view of the entire room.

The interrogation room itself was empty for the moment and as David looked at the agent who’d brought him there the man said, “He’s being brought down now Agent Ryder. They’ve been working on him for two weeks now but he’s still not said a word, you’re going to need something special to get anything from him.”

Nodding his thanks, David entered the room and took a seat in one of the metal chairs. It was uncomfortable and cold, but that was the point. It wasn’t meant to be luxurious it was meant to put people ill at ease. Then he thought about how he was going to handle things, from the sounds of it physical violence hadn’t worked and most conventional techniques would probably have been employed by now. Most agents were skilled interrogators and they’d have tried everything in their quest to get what they wanted.

Then the sounds of chains in the corridor outside were heard and he looked at the door as a man in a blue jumpsuit was forced into the room and sat down in the metal chair. Seeing David sat across the table from him, a glimmer of recognition shone in the man’s eyes and the other agents left the room and closed the door behind them. The silence in the room was deafening as David sat there, staring the man in the eye as he tried to win the battle of wills that had sprung up between the two of them.

After what seemed like an eternity the man finally lowered his eyes, unable to withstand the intensity of David’s stare. Sensing he’d won the first round, David got to his feet and began to stalk around the room, before coming to a halt directly behind the man in his blind spot.

“Who are you?” was David’s first question, innocuous enough but his intention was to give the man a false sense of security.

“My name is Youssef,” the man answered, his voice sounding rough as he spoke through cut lips and bruised lungs.

“Well Youssef, let me outline your situation. Nobody knows where you are and nobody can help you. The only person that can improve your situation is you.” As he said this, David moved back to stand in front of the table and leaned forward, looking Youssef in the eye.

For a moment there was confusion in the man’s eyes, partly from David’s words and partly because his interrogator’s stare had none of the anger of malice the previous pair had shown. Then after what seemed like an eternity for both men he said, “What are you proposing?”

“I’m not an unkind man,” David said, “I can understand the viewpoint of many of your compatriots and I bear no malice towards you personally for shooting me. From one soldier to another that’s the risk we take when signing up. So I have nothing against you, but you do have something I need. I need information about your leader. He’s declared war on me and my organisation, so we’re going to find him, and we’re going to kill him.”

“And you think you can get what you need from me?” Youssef asked, a hint of anger entering his voice. “Do you think my loyalty is so cheap I’ll just give it away?” Internally though a very different conversation was being conducted in his mind. The fact was that he wasn’t all that loyal to Nathaniel, merely the concept of loyalty and honour.

When he’d first joined Nathaniel’s group he’d believed he was a soldier for God, fighting for what was right but after so many years Youssef knew that wasn’t the case. He’d seen the lunacy of religion in every suicide bombing, every family torn apart and every orphaned child. Nathaniel’s own lust for blood had only hastened his misgivings and now he despised everything he and men like him stood for. But only one man had ever tried to leave Nathaniel and the consequences of that decision had been so horrific that no one else had attempted to do the same.

Now Youssef found himself wondering whether this was his chance, he’d always considered that his situation was akin to being on an out of control freight train. You were just trapped there with no way of getting off without being killed and yet death was inevitable somewhere along the line. Maybe though, he reflected, the train had slowed just enough for him to jump to safety. Maybe.

While all this had raced through his captive’s mind at breakneck speed, David was thinking of his own response. It was clear that this man wasn’t a fanatic who couldn’t be negotiated with, and it was also clear that he valued loyalty highly. Now David had to think of a response that wouldn’t outrage the man into refusing to give him the required information.

“Not at all,” he said, with a placatory tone to his voice, “I’m just giving you the facts. Another fact is that if you give me what I need, I will personally make sure you go free tomorrow. You’ll get a plane ticket to a destination of your choice and that will be it.”

“You cannot be serious,” Youssef exclaimed, disbelief evident in his voice, “no one in your government would agree to such a deal.” In his mind though a small celebration was breaking out as he saw the chance for a new life and a fresh start, perhaps even a way to atone for his past mistakes. He’d caused too much death in this world but here was an opportunity for him to search for redemption.

David smiled at that and simply said, “I can make it happen. But you need to tell me what I need to know.”

For a moment Youssef appeared to consider the offer, in which time his mind provided a counter to the initial celebrations with the sobering thought that if he went free Nathaniel would find him, and dying at Nathaniel’s hands, suffering through his every torturous whim, would be far worse than going to prison for the rest of his life. Now filled with regret that he would have to say goodbye to his own chance for a new life, he looked up and said, “I can’t betray my brothers like this, I’d rather go to prison.”

As the other man spoke, David was sure he could hear a hint of sadness in the man’s reply and realised that he wasn’t making the decision out of choice. Clearly there was someone who terrified Youssef far more than a British prison. Feeling that he had his man made though, David played the last card in his hand, honour.

Nodding in understanding he said, “I can understand that, and it is your choice to make. Consider this however, ask yourself why you’re fighting and what it’s all for. At the Stock Exchange you were going to murder everyone you took hostage and most of them were entirely innocent. What would the point of that been?”

At that Youssef slammed his fists into the metal table angrily and said, “That’s a lie,” the fury unmistakable in his voice. “I was not going to kill the hostages,” he said clearly and precisely, “they were our only way out of the Stock Exchange, why would I kill them?”

At that David sat down, fixed the man in the eye and to his shock saw he wasn’t lying. Pondering for a moment what that meant, he eventually said, “You tell me. Your men said said the ‘Boss’ had told them to kill all the hostages. So tell me, who gave those instructions?”

“Nathaniel,” Youssef said, his voice barely a whisper, forcing David to lean in to try to hear. Seeing this the other man raised his voice a little and said more clearly, “Nathaniel Adir.”

“And I take it you don’t agree with those orders, which is perhaps why he didn’t tell you them?” David asked as he was treated to a glare from Youssef while the other man seemed to mentally debate what to do internally. Now the fury of the new revelation had burned away his previous concerns about falling into Nathaniel’s hands. He now knew that the bastard needed to die and he hoped that this teenager standing in front of him could be the one to do it.

His mind made up he said, “This isn’t what I signed on for. I joined to be a soldier, fighting to defend my country and my people from the Israelis and anyone else who tried to oppress them. But what Nathaniel does, what he’s ordered me to do, those aren’t the actions of a soldier but a murderer.”

“So why not leave and join another group?” David asked, genuine curiosity in his voice.

Youssef looked at him with a slight smile at his naivety. “Nathaniel doesn’t do resignations, you either die in his service or he kills you but no one just leaves. I always likened it to being on a speeding freight train with no way of stopping, you can try to jump off and the impact will kill you or you can sit there and wait for the inevitable derailment and die that way.”

Nodding his understanding David said, “Perhaps it’s time to start making things right then, Youssef. Here and now I’m offering you a way to make amends by helping me kill Nathaniel. I’m giving you the chance to regain your honour.”

At that Youssef laughed and said, “Honour? That’s an old fashioned concept. I didn’t think anyone believed in it anymore.”

“Well it’s obvious you do, so that makes two of us who are living in the past,” David quipped back, “but that’s not such a bad thing. I sometimes think the world would be better off if people starting to believe in these things more often.”

Youssef nodded at that before saying, “Sometimes I wish that too. But someone who definitely doesn’t believe in it is Nathaniel Adir. The man is out of control. He’s on a personal mission for revenge and he won’t stop until he’s either dead or he’s killed everyone in the West. There was a time I’d have followed him anywhere, a time when I was much younger and foolish.”

David didn’t say anything at that; instead he waited for Youssef to continue, allowing the other man to control the conversation. Eventually his patience was rewarded and Youssef said, “In fact I don’t really know what I’m fighting for anymore. When I was younger I believed everything the clerics told us; that the West was evil, that we were soldiers for Allah and that we were defending our country, our culture and our religion. Now I think that we’re just fighting for other men’s greed and power hunger, all I know though is that murdering innocent people in the name of God isn’t the way to worship him.”

At this point David said, “Well do the right thing then. Surely that’s the way to worship Allah properly, by trying to bring a little more peace to the world and stopping a little more death?”

Youssef bowed his head for a moment at that and put his hands over his face as he did so. He remained in that position for several moments during which David worried that he’d lost him. Eventually though Youssef raised his head and David was surprised to see that there were tears in his eyes.

Then Youssef nodded, suddenly sure of himself, and said, “You’re right, the madness needs to stop. I’ll tell you everything I know but in return I want to remain in this country. If I go home now I will very probably be killed. So if you let me stay here I will tell you everything I know.”

David looked hard at Youssef for a moment, trying to ascertain whether the man was being serious. He was helped by the fact that he had always been good at reading people, especially judging whether or not they were telling him the truth and his instinct told him that Youssef was being absolutely genuine with him. So he said, “I promise, but in return the information you give me will have to be pretty good, and the deal will only kick in when we verify what you give us. Agreed?”

Youssef nodded at that before proceeding to give David chapter and verse on everything he knew. He told David about a training camp in Egypt, although he couldn’t give a precise location. He also spoke about the existence of other sites in North Africa and the Middle East, as well as telling everything he knew about Nathaniel’s history. Youssef also gave David the details about Nathaniel’s master plan, the attack he was planning that would bring more death to the West than all previous attacks put together. It made a compelling tale and while David had been hoping for specific locations, he couldn’t deny that what he’d been given was invaluable and certainly worth Youssef’s price.

When Youssef finally fell silent, David got to his feet and said, “Thank you Youssef, I’m going to go and deliver this information to my superior. As soon as we verify it I’ll make sure that we hold up our end of the bargain, you have my word.” Then he knocked on the door, which opened almost immediately, and left the room and Youssef behind. He almost ran back to the waiting car and soon he was back at the safe house and delivering his report in its entirety to the Director.

Chapter 25

In short it took only fifteen minutes for David to bring both the Director and Mary up to date on his conversation with Youssef. Their expressions during his story transformed into ones of utter incredulity and at the end Mary even said, “I can’t believe you would even entertain making a deal with this guy, or even believe anything he had to say. He’s a terrorist and he was going to murder over a hundred people at the Stock Exchange.”

David shook his head and just said, “I’ve never been wrong yet and I believe that everything he told me was the truth.”

“Well then let’s examine what we’ve learned,” the Director said. “There’s a training camp somewhere in Egypt but we don’t know where. This Nathaniel Adir has this master plan but we don’t know when it’s going to happen. It seems Youssef doesn’t have a lot of specific intelligence for us, which makes me believe him actually. It would make sense that this Adir would keep most information to himself and would only tell his subordinates the bare essentials.”

David interrupted then and said, “We shouldn’t be questioning whether he’s telling the truth, it’s more what we do with the information he’s given us. What do you think?”

The Director thought for a moment and said, “I agree with you David. I’ve actually been getting updates from other intelligence agencies we’ve been liaising with. It seems that GRU are also tracking the ‘Brigade of the Faithful’ and they might have some leads for you. I do know they have their team in Egypt, and considering Youssef’s intelligence that’s where I’m going to send you.”

 “What do the Russians know?” David couldn’t help but ask. Just because the GRU were in the country wasn’t much of a lead, even if it did coincide with Youssef’s information.

The Director shook his head at that and said, “They wouldn’t tell me over the phone, but they have agreed to share their intelligence when you’re on the ground. But both the Americans and the French have supplied little titbits of information as well that suggest Egypt is definitely somewhere we need to investigate.”

David nodded in understanding but he didn’t say anything for a moment because he was deep in thought. Eventually though he looked up and said, “Will I have any support out there? It’s a long way from home. What assets do we have on the ground?”

“None at the moment,” the Director conceded, “we’re trying to organise something now. But in the meantime both the Americans and the Russians have offered their help. The Russian agent in charge will read you in fully on their intelligence and the Americans have offered to equip you with whatever you require. To keep things discrete you’ll be flying out commercially under an assumed identity so you won’t be able to take anything with you.”

David smiled at that, finally he was going to be able to leave the house and even the prospect of being shot at by terrorists wasn’t enough to dampen his excitement at going to Egypt. It was somewhere he’d always wanted to visit, not least because of its rich archaeological history, some of which he’d been taught about as part of his degree. Then he asked the only question left that needed answering, “When do I leave?”

“This afternoon,” the Director answered, “you’ll be going incognito so it’s not registered to us. It’ll arrive early evening to take you to the airport so you’d better start packing right now. I’d advise packing light and for functionality. Here are your documents and tickets.” With that the Director held out an envelope to David who accepted it, then opened it to check everything was there.

First he checked the tickets and saw they were fine, then he pulled out the passport and saw his cover name was going to be David Jones. Satisfied that everything was as it should be, he replaced everything back in the envelope. Then he got up and excused himself, the Director was right to suggest he start packing straight away, he didn’t have long before the car arrived.

Upstairs he quickly got all of his clothes out of his bag and began to rifle through the pile to find some sensible items to take with him. With the goal of packing light, he decided on taking a couple of linen shirts and a few T-shirts with the goal of keeping himself cool in the desert sun. He followed it up with a couple pairs of light hiking trousers and a set of desert fatigues. This along with clean underwear and socks all managed to fit into a small holdall and on top of the clothes he added a set of desert boots.

With his main packing done, he then began to stuff some extra things into a rucksack including a laptop and a satellite phone both of which would allow him to remain in contact with The Department. It was at that moment he heard a soft knock on the door and turned to see Mary standing in the doorway. She looking unsure of herself, an emotion he hadn’t seen in her since meeting her all those years ago.

Remaining in the doorway, as if unwilling to cross the threshold into the room, she said “Can we talk for a moment?” Her tone of voice immediately occupied his attention, as he heard a note of worry in it.

Standing, he looked at her and said, “Of course, you know you can always talk to me about anything.” In response to the note of worry, he did his best to inject optimism into his own tone of voice, but it didn’t seem to work judging by her expression.

“I don’t want you to go on this mission,” she said, “I just have a bad feeling about this one and I don’t want you dying in some far away country all alone. Just tell the Director you’ve changed your mind and you want to stay here instead.”

At this David felt troubled. It was clear that she felt very strongly about this, and yet he knew he couldn’t do what she was asking him to. “I can’t,” he said, “I’m the best man for the job. You know that, and besides I gave my word and I can’t back out now.”

“David, please think about this. You say I’m like a sister to you. If that’s true then please just do as I ask and don’t go to Egypt. I don’t want to be getting you back in a pinewood box and I have the worst feeling that’s exactly what’s going to happen,” as she said this there was a catch in Mary’s voice and when David looked at her he saw tears brimming in her eyes.

This confused him, Mary had always cared about his safety and shown concern for him but she’d never acted like this before. She’d certainly never asked him to back out of a mission before. Looking directly into her teary eyes, he saw for the first time the fear that was eating her up from the inside and the worst thing was he didn’t know how to make her feel better.

“Listen to me Mary, no matter how good they think they are or how many they have; these guys aren’t going to put me in the ground. I will come back alive and well. But you know I can’t back out, and no matter what you say that won’t change I’m afraid.” As David said this in his best comforting tone, she just shook her head, unable to say anything and stormed out of the room. A moment later he heard the door to her room slam shut behind her and then a muffled sob could just be heard on the other side.

Knowing there was nothing he could do or say to make things better, David finished packing and then took another trip to the shooting range. There he spent another hour and a half firing round after round into the paper targets and causing a complete paper massacre. After a while blasting away at paper targets, he began to feel hungry and headed back to the ground floor to get something to eat. As he walked into the kitchen, he saw Mary was there as well. Joining her in waiting for food, there was a frosty silence between the two of them.

Fortunately he didn’t have to endure the silence for long as only a couple of minutes after he walked in, she was given with a tray of food and left rather hurriedly, while he was forced to continue waiting. It wasn’t long though before he was given his own tray and he left the kitchen, taking it upstairs to his room where he ate leisurely, in no hurry to do anything for the moment.

After he finished eating, he checked his watch and saw it was nearly four in the afternoon. Then he realised he was still in his sweaty clothes from before and decided to get a shower and then change into some clothes he could travel in.

This was done within half an hour and when he next stepped out of his room he was dressed in the boots, a pair of light tan trousers and a blue linen shirt with a white T-shirt underneath, all ready for his trip to Egypt. Then for a moment he found himself at a loss. He had at least an hour till his car arrived and to pass the time he decided to do some research on the current situation in Egypt and get some on what he could expect on the ground.

So he ventured down to the library, which was deserted, and booted up the laptop before connecting it to the internet network. That done David accessed an encrypted system run by The Department to provide the latest intelligence on a huge variety of topics. The first thing he did was to check the Foreign Office’s assessment of the current situation in Egypt, and then he moved onto MI6’s assessment. With the conventional avenues out of the way, he accessed the latest Department reports on Egypt. These were detailed reports that contained information from a variety of intelligence agencies all compiled into a single document.

He ended up spending a full hour and a half examining every piece of intelligence he could concerning the situation, stability and general state of affairs in Egypt. By the end he knew everything there was to know about the situation in the country. He knew things were tense but largely calm in the most populated areas. The deserts were largely desolate with little in the way of settlement or security and he knew that the worst area was the Sinai. However there was no indication from any of the intelligence that hinted at the probable location for a training camp. When he logged onto his personal account on the site however he did find that his full mission briefing and background had been uploaded and he decided to use the flight to read it, downloading the documents onto his laptop.

At that moment he was interrupted by a knock on the door to the library and it opened to see Mary standing there. “Hi Mary,” he said, at a loss as to what he could possibly say after their argument earlier that day.

“Hello Agent Ryder,” she said stiffly, “your car has arrived and is waiting to take you to the airport.” Her tone wrenched at his heart. He knew he’d hurt her by refusing to back out of the mission, but he didn’t know what he could have done.

Nevertheless he made one last attempt to leave with things between him and Mary back to normal and said, “Mary, please don’t be mad at me. I know you’re hurt but what else can I do?”

“Don’t go,” she said, her voice injected with an undercurrent of hope that he would change his mind. For a moment he seriously considered backing out there and then, just to keep her happy. She was the closest thing to family he had left and he couldn’t bear to see her acting so coldly towards him.

But at the last moment he shook his head and forced himself to say, “I’m sorry Mary but I can’t. I am what I am, if I wasn’t then we’d never have become as close as we are. I hope you can forgive me by the time I touchdown in Egypt but if you can’t and you want to cede your responsibilities on the mission then I understand. If you could ask the driver to wait momentarily, I’ll just get my bags.”

With that he walked out of the library, his laptop under his arm and hurried upstairs and into his room. Once there he quickly repacked his laptop into the rucksack and slung the bag over his shoulder before picking up the holdall. Then, after taking a last look around the room he was leaving behind, he walked out and closed the door behind him.

Hurrying downstairs, he walked straight out of the front door to see a silver VW saloon waiting for him. Shoving his bags into the boot, he stepped around the car and made to get into the front passenger seat. Before he could get in however he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to see Mary standing there, fresh tears in her eyes.

“Just come home safe,” she said, just managing to choke back the tears, “promise me that.” As she said this, the tears finally began to fall and David, lost for words once again, just wrapped his arms around her and held her tight, giving her the comfort she seemed to need. Eventually however the driver became impatient and shouted for him to hurry up, punctuating his words with blasts of the car horn. Before he could let go of her however, Mary pulled away, wiped the tears away and just said, “You’d better be off. Good luck David, and don’t forget to check in when you land.”

With that he got into the car while she went back inside the house. She didn’t look back as the silver saloon set off towards the airport. He didn’t look back towards the house as the car left through the gates and began to head for Heathrow Airport, from which he’d be flying to Cairo international airport. It took an hour to arrive at the airport at which point the driver of the VW waited just long enough for him to get out and collect his bags from the boot before driving off while he went on into the terminal alone.

It took nearly two hours to make his way through to the airport and to his gate at which point he still had half an hour to wait before his gate opened and he boarded the Boeing 747. After that he had a four and a half hour flight to get through.

During the flight he occupied himself by going over the documents he’d downloaded to his computer, watching the in flight film and when that finally finished he decided it was time to turn on his music and try to get some sleep. He woke up just as the plane began to descend and after a few more minutes the plane touched down on Egyptian tarmac and his mission began.

The first thing he had to do was then navigate his way through the terminal, retrieve his hold all from the luggage carousel and then find a taxi outside. Once done he told the driver the name of his hotel and then sat back in his seat and got his first glimpses of Cairo whipping by through the taxi’s window. Fortunately the hotel wasn’t far and he was soon at the front desk and collecting his key before heading up to the third floor and his room.

 Walking into the room he was pleased to see it was modest but comfortable and by this time he was desperately tired and needed a full night’s sleep. But before he could sleep he had to check in with Mary and let her know he’d landed. Dialling the number on his encrypted satellite phone, he waited for a moment as the phone rang before she picked up at the other end. “Mary, its David, I’ve landed and I’m at the hotel.”

“Okay David, there’s not much more coming up at this end, but I do have some details for tomorrow for you,” she said.

“I’m all ears,” David replied, fighting back a yawn as he resolved to hold off sleep until she’d finished. “Well the American liaison will be meeting you tomorrow morning to equip you,” she started, then continued to say, “then in the afternoon the Russians are going to get in contact with you and brief you on everything they know. When we get any intelligence from our end about an exact location I’ll get in contact and let you know. Otherwise sleep well David and we’ll check in with you tomorrow.” Mary’s voice had a welcome familiarity to it as he listened to her instructions and remembered other occasions, including the Stock Exchange, where that voice had pointed him to the way out. Now that voice was pointing him towards the trail and the hunt, which was even more satisfying to him but there wasn’t time to act now. Instead he switched off his phone and lay down on the bed and within moments he was fast asleep.

Meanwhile at the same time Nathaniel was being called at his base by an ally and what the other man had to say was of great interest. “Ryder is in Egypt,” the voice said, “he’s staying at a hotel in Cairo. I expect the usual payment to be delivered to the normal account for this information.”

Nathaniel, his impatience rising with the cryptic information he was being given, said angrily “Give me the address!”

“That will cost extra,” the voice replied, irritation obvious evident.

“Fine, I’ll pay whatever you ask, just give me the fucking address,” Nathaniel shouted and the voice finally gave him the address of the hotel. No sooner had the other man finished than Nathaniel ended the call and dialled in another number into his phone. Presently the calling tone was replaced by a new voice on the other end and he quickly gave his orders. “I have an address and a room number for you. Send a man to eliminate the occupant. I want minimum fuss and absolute efficiency. Understood?”

The other man gave an affirmative and ended the call, just as Nathaniel had expected. Then he was left with the silence of his room in his base. He wondered whether several thousand miles away David Ryder was ready for the blitzkrieg that had directed towards him. Meanwhile he was confident he was safe where he was, nothing could be traced to him, and began to plan his next attack on The West. This time perhaps an attack on a University would create more panic and terror than his previous attacks.

Chapter 26

David woke up to the sound of knocking on the door to his hotel room. Getting out of bed, he slowly and cautiously moved to the peephole and looked out. He saw a young man in one of the hotel’s uniforms standing there, looking slightly nervous. Satisfied there wasn’t a threat he opened the door and said, “What is it?” to the man.

Instead of answering, the man lunged forwards without warning, taking David by surprise as he fell backwards into the room. Then the hotel employee was on top of him and in his hand a knife had suddenly appeared. The blade was long, slim and tapered to a sharp point. It appeared to be a version of the famous Fairburn and Sykes weapon. Whatever it was based on, the thing was clearly designed for slipping between the ribs and puncturing the heart, a perfect killing weapon.

The man stabbed downwards without hesitation, desperately trying to plunge the blade into David’s chest. Recovered from his initial shock however, he threw up his arms and managed to get a grip on the man’s wrist, halting the blade’s downward trajectory. For a moment the two men struggled on the floor of the hotel room, each desperately trying to gain the upper hand.

A frantic couple of minutes followed before David managed to draw his legs up to his chest and with a sudden burst of energy kicked towards the ceiling, throwing his opponent off him. The would be killer flew for a short moment before crashing into the wall and slumping to the floor with a dazed look on his face. Seizing his opportunity, David got to his feet and went on the attack.

The other man was still getting to his feet when David, charging forward at a dead run, slammed him back up against the wall. He then seized the knife from the man’s weakened grasp and slipped the blade between the ribs, penetrating the attacker’s heart before he’d ever recovered. It was a perfect thrust, exactly the kind of blow the knife had been designed for.

For the next few minutes, David watched as the man’s life ebbed from his body in a rapidly spreading red stain coming through his uniform. Before the man was fully expired though, and before the blood touched the carpet, he put a towel over the wound. Then picking up his phone, he dialled home and after a short moment it was picked up by a very sleepy sounding Mary.

“It’s David; I’ve come up against the opposition. A man just tried to kill me in my hotel room and now I’ve got a body to clean up.” As he spoke he did his best to sound calm but his breathlessness and a slight raw edge to his voice caught her attention.

At his words, she immediately became awake and alert and began to talk even as she moved to somewhere else in the safe house. “You’re on speaker with me and the Director. We’re checking whether we have any assets in the city to help clean up, but the French may be better placed to help.”

“Don’t worry about it Mary,” David interrupted, cutting her off mid flow, “I can sort out the body easily enough. But you can tell me what time I’m supposed to be meeting the Americans this morning. If the opposition already knows I’m here then the sooner I’ve got piece of mind the better.”

He smiled at that, he knew that by piece of mind she meant a weapon, before he then returned to the troubling fact about the situation. “I think we have a serious problem though Mary,” he said. “I’ve been in the country less than twelve hours and already the ‘Brigade of the Faithful have organise a hit. That’s either impossibly organised or else they were tipped off and had everything in place.”

“it looks that way,” she conceded, “but what do we do about it? Bearing in mind he have no idea where they’re getting their information, and we don’t have the resources to start an exhaustive search, there’s not a lot we can do to stop it.”

He nodded at that, knowing she was right. There wasn’t anything they could do on the UK end of things, but he knew there was something he could do. Having come to his decision, he informed Mary of it, saying, “From now on tell no one of my movements apart from the Director and Jack. That way we can be sure there are no leaks coming from within and I only have to worry about the Brigade. As for any new intelligence, have it sent straight to you from the analysts, no third party gets a hold of it. Something’s wrong here and I don’t intend to take any chances. I’ll check in later.”

With that he signed off, and put the phone in his pocket, before attending to the problem presented by the body in his room. The man was dead by now and his quick thinking had prevented the body from bleeding out all over the floor. Opening the door to the corridor, he checked left and right to make sure there were no eyes about to witness what he was about to do. Then ducking back inside the room he grabbed the body by the shoulders and dragged it into a sitting position, before crouching and hefting the dead weight over his shoulder.

Standing to his full height he carried the body out of his room and walked to the end of the corridor. At the very end there was a closed window that overlooked the side of the hotel, the perfect place to get rid of his attacker’s body. Opening the window with one hand he pushed it wide open, sat the body on the sill and then gave the lightest of pushes to send it into space and hurtling towards the ground.

The grisly duty done, he closed the window and locked it again, then wiped his prints off using the bottom of his T-shirt. Satisfied that the loose end was tied off permanently, he walked back along the corridor and headed back into his room. There he took the time to have a shower, washing off the blood that had transferred onto him while carrying the body. Once he was clean he saw his white T-shirt had been covered with blood. Deciding it was a lost cause he decided to get rid of it, and the bloody towel, at the earliest opportunity outside the hotel.

Having sorted himself out, he dialled in the number he’d been given for the American liaison and called the man to confirm the time and location for his meet. Nothing had changed; he was to be picked up from his hotel by the liaison and taken straight to a secure location where he could equip himself for the days to come.

Checking his watch, he saw that it was only ten minutes till his pick up arrived, so he grabbed a light tan coloured jacket and went downstairs. As he went out he remembered at the last minute to put the do not disturb sign on the door, making sure that no curious housekeepers would be snooping through his room while he was out. Downstairs he grabbed himself a piece of toast from the attached restaurant and quickly ate it while waiting for his contact to arrive.

He didn’t have to wait long however because five minutes early, a car pulled up in front of the hotel and a man stepped out. He walked straight into the hotel lobby looked once in David’s direction and gave a single wave, then went right back to the car and got back behind the wheel.

David, following on just behind, got in on the passenger side and when he’d shut his door, the driver turned and said, “Jones, I presume? My name is Agent Lynch and the Agency gives its regards.” With that he held out a hand, which David shook and then he set off into the waking city of Cairo.

Navigating through the early morning traffic, the driver didn’t say anything else instead focusing on the task of driving. David meanwhile continued to ponder how the Brigade of the Faithful had managed to get such up to date information about him. Either someone on the inside was passing on information, or The Department wasn’t quite as mysterious as they had always thought.

The journey through the city didn’t take long, which was fortunate considering the hectic and dangerous traffic that had suddenly appeared part way through their journey. After than half an hour in the car, David was getting out in front of a warehouse. Guided by Lynch inside, he paused at the door while waiting for the lights to come on and when they did he found himself in a soldier’s toy shop.

He was surrounded by dozens of racks, all of them packed with weaponry. Almost every conceivable type of weapon was represented in that warehouse space with pistols, rifles, shotguns, grenade launchers and more all visible on the racks. As he took in the sight, Lynch said, “Take whatever you need.” That was all that needed to be said and David immediately set off to browse.

The first thing he decided to find was a sidearm and he’d soon located a rack full of pistols. He quickly spotted a Browning there, along with a Berretta, a Sig and a Glock. Spoiled for choice he quietly adjudged the various strengths of each weapon before finally picking up the Browning. It was the weapon he’d become most experienced with, and despite being a little heavier, less accurate and with a smaller magazine than its rivals, his familiarity with it eventually sealed the deal. Seeing his interest in the Browning, Lynch said, “We’ve got a silencer and shoulder holster for that Browning. Shall I add them to your shopping cart as well?”

David smiled at the internet shopping reference and answered, “Please. I’ll take it with ten magazines and enough ammunition for two times that. I don’t want to run the risk of running out.”

“Right you are then,” Lynch said, taking the Browning off David and fishing out the other parts of the package. Then he dragged a holdall bag in a desert camouflage scheme and put them all in while he went searching for the requested magazines and ammunition.

Meanwhile David had moved on to searching for some heavier firepower, eventually finding himself in front of the assault rifles. Considering his options, he saw plenty of contenders including an M16 and its cousin the M4 but eventually he opted for the legendary AK. The particular model he held was the AKM, an upgraded version on the original developed in the late 50’s. Handing it to Lynch he asked for the same amount of ammunition as the Browning.

His weaponry sorted, he then went looking around the rest of the warehouse and found himself a GPS unit as an added extra which was also added to the bag. Happy with his equipment, he returned to Lynch, who smiled as he approached and offered him the Browning, already loaded with a magazine. “I figured you wouldn’t want to leave unarmed so I took the liberty,” he said with a slight smile on his face, as he winked knowingly at David who smiled back in return.

Accepting the pistol, David checked it before placing it in the shoulder holster which Lynch had also handed him. He then slipped the shoulder holster on before covering it over with his jacket, making sure it couldn’t be seen by an average passerby. Once he was finished, he followed Lynch back into the sun of Egypt and got back into the car which immediately headed back to the hotel it had left only forty minutes before.

As they drove, he felt happier with the security and peace of mind provided by the small arsenal he had on his person and in the bag, which was laying on the back seat. Then, less than ten minutes after leaving the warehouse, his phone vibrated in his pocket. Pulling it out he saw the caller ID was blocked and knew it was Mary, so he hit the button to accept the call and put the handset to his ear.

“David?” Mary’s voice came through the phone and he wondered whether she had anything new for him.

“I’m here, what’s up?” he answered, sounding as jovial as possible in an attempt to set her mind at ease, he was sure that she’d been worrying no end since his earlier call.

“I just wanted to check the meeting with the Americans had all gone to plan. I also wanted to say that, in terms of our earlier conversation, myself and the Director have set it up so that all information comes directly to us and then to you, no one else.”

“Understood,” he said, continuing, “I’ll check in again after my briefing with the Russians. The meeting with our American friend went excellently though and I now have considerable peace of mind. I’ll talk to you later Mary.”

“Okay David, stay safe,” she said, and after she finished he ended the call. As he replaced the phone in his pocket, he looked up and noticed that he was beginning to recognise bits of the city from his window’s view. Then about ten minutes later the hotel came into view. Smiling he thanked Lynch, grabbed the holdall from the backseat and walked inside as behind him the car set off to his next job of the day.

Inside the hotel, David quickly went upstairs and stowed his holdall in his room. Before putting it away though he found a couple more magazines for the Browning and loaded them with nine millimetre rounds, thirteen rounds per magazine and twenty six in total. He then immediately exited the room again and headed back downstairs as it was only a few minutes before he was due to meet one of the Russian agents for his briefing. Walking back into the air-conditioned lobby, he somehow found himself in the bar, which was open already and ordered a beer from the bartender, already sweating profusely from the heat of the day in spite of the air conditioning.

As he drank, he considered the task ahead of him. He was facing an enemy who was already aware of his presence and knew what he looked like. On the other hand he was hunting ghosts, he didn’t have an exact description, he had the barest hint of an idea regarding their numbers and he didn’t have a location for their base was. In short the odds were stacked against him massively, and his chances of success were slim. But he put that to one side, it didn’t matter to him what the odds were. The fact of the matter was that he’d have to succeed which meant thoughts of failure were counterproductive. He would succeed and it didn’t matter how difficult that success would be.

At this point, and just as he finished his beer, his thoughts were interrupted by movement behind him and a strangely familiar voice said, “Mr Jones. I’m your contact, sent to brief you on the situation here. Shall we go?”

Turning, he got the shock of his life when he saw a face from his past standing in front of him. Words failing him for a moment he simply smiled, which brought his contact out in hysterical laughter. “What’s wrong David,” she said, “are you that surprised to see me, or perhaps you’ve forgotten those days in the desert?”

That had him laughing then and finally the power of speech returned to him as he said, “Forget you Katya? No chance; I had no idea you were here though, no one thought to warn me to expect a face from the past briefing me.”

With that he stepped forward and warmly embraced Katya, the woman he’d saved on his very first mission, and judging by the warmth with which she returned the hug she was just as pleased to see him. When the two broke apart, she motioned for him to follow her and led him to a waiting car in front of the hotel. Getting in on the passenger side, he looked across to her as she got behind the wheel, and asked, “So, how have you been? It’s been a while since we last spoke.”

Katya smiled at that, even as she began to navigate her way through the city, although it was a few moments before she found herself answer David’s question. Eventually though she said, “I’ve been fine; life goes on, you know? I’ve been spending the last few months trying to track down this ‘Brigade of the Faithful. They’ve organised attacks and bombings across Russia, funding themselves by brokering drug deals with the Mafia. Even so until a couple of weeks ago and the Stock Exchange we’ve been chasing ghosts, it’s only since joining forces with the British that we’ve managed to generate any leads. Now we have a veritable treasure trove of intelligence, which led me and the team I’m with here. A team you’ll be meeting in just a few minutes.”

David grinned at that, Katya was just as he remembered. She seemed cold and robotically professional on the outside but he knew that inside she was as warm as anyone else; you just had to get to know her. Meanwhile he’d continued speaking, filling the silence of the car. “In other news I broke up with my boyfriend,” she said idly, “I caught him cheating on me so he had to go, he was lucky he left alive actually, I was sorely tempted to shoot him. I’ve managed to spend more time with my family and I’m due a holiday and wondering where to spend it.”

“Why not spent it with your family?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“I’ll spend some of it with them, but I’m due a fair few weeks and I thought I might come to Britain for a couple of weeks. You could give me the grand tour of all the tourist sites and we could do some proper catching up.” She replied, glancing sideways at him and waiting for some kind of reaction to her suggestion.

At this prospect David only just managed to stop himself grinning like an idiot, but he couldn’t stop a smile from lighting up his face. It had been too long since they’d properly caught up and it would be nice for them to be able to do so in person and while not in mortal danger. Then he realised that Katya was waiting for his answer, and compelled himself to say, “I’d like that Katya, I’d like that a lot. In fact I’m due a holiday as well, from both University and The Department so if you come down during the summer, we can have any number of weeks catching up.”

“It’s a plan then,” she replied happily before becoming all business again. “Now do you have any updates to the situation?” she asked, her mind fixed firmly back on the job.

David, adopted a very casual tone, just said, “Well I was woken up this morning by a guy tried to stab me with a when I opened the door. He lost that confrontation but what’s for certain is that they know I’m here and they know I’m coming after them.”

At this new development, she looked surprised, although her voice didn’t betray that as she maintained her professional demeanour. “At least that’s one less to worry about,” she said, “you could use some support on this one though David. How about you give me a call when you find out where these guys are hiding and I’ll give you a bit of backup. It might make the odds favour you slightly more.”

David smiled, he’d hoped she would make such an offer and now that she had, he had no reason to say no. He knew that he could trust her and considering he was in the lion’s den, some backup would be a very welcome development. “I think I will Katya, I could use some support for when things get hairy.”

Unfortunately there was no more time for conversation as the car had brought them to their destination and Katya pulled up in front of an office building. Leading the way, she opened the door for him and he entered into an air conditioned reception area. Walking past the front desk, Katya completely ignored the looks from the two receptionists sitting there and walked along a corridor into a larger reception room. Following her less than a second behind, when David walked into this room he immediately found himself staring down the barrels of several pistols.

Reacting by instinct his hand immediately went to the Browning in his shoulder holster and it took only a split second for him to have his own sidearm out and raised. Then Katya’s voice broke through the tension that had erupted in the room. “This is Agent Ryder gentlemen;” she said, “he’s here for the briefing. Now lower your weapons and I’m sure he’ll do the same.”

At her words, the guards lowered and replaced their weapons and David quickly reciprocated with a smile, restoring his Browning to the shoulder holster. Then Katya continued to lead him through the building and he soon ended up on the second floor and at the entrance to a conference room already occupied by several GRU agents. They were clearly waiting for the pair to arrive before they began.

As David quickly took one of the two empty seats at the large central table, one of the older, and clearly more senior, agents got up and addressed the room. “Well gentlemen, now that our guest has arrived we can begin with this briefing. If you’ll direct your attention to the reports in front of you we can go over what we know and try to provide the needed assistance to our friend from the UK.”

Chapter 27

David had been in the conference room listening to the Russian team brief him on their intelligence for an hour and in that time he was struck by just how much was based on conjecture. He was also again struck by just how little was known about this terror group. For any organisation to keep itself so hidden was an incredible feat, especially considering how many intelligence agencies were after them. As he came to these conclusions, the Russian team leader finally came to the end of his briefing and concluded by speaking directly to him.

“So Agent Ryder, now you know everything we do, which isn’t very much if we’re being honest. Still I hope it helps in your hunt. Just make sure that when you catch up with the Brigade of the Faithful, ensure that none of them survive to attack more Russian targets.”

“It will be my pleasure,” David answered. “Now if you’ll excuse me I need to be getting back to my hotel as I’m expected to report in with my superiors in an hour. Hopefully our analysts will have got a location for me at which point I may be leaving the Cairo before long,” and even as he said this he got up and excused himself from the room. He was quickly followed by Katya who was to drive him back to the hotel. During the drive things were quiet in the car as he continued to think about what the Russians had said.

The Brigade of the Faithful was considered to be responsible for dozens of terrorist attacks worldwide although the outfit never took credit for its actions. In fact most of the time the link was only made by the sophistication of the attacks, all of having been planned to the last detail and executed with absolute precision.

The Russians had been using fragments of information from emails recovered from various locations linked to the attacks, to determine the group’s identity but even those breakthroughs had only come recently with the new information discovered by The Department. The Russians hadn’t been lax though and they’d managed to track down a lead that had brought them to Egypt. The lead suggested that Youssef’s training camp did exist.

There were suspicions that it was either located in the insecure Sinai region or somewhere near the Libyan border perhaps. Both were equally lawless and large areas of open space that would allow the training camp to remain undiscovered perhaps indefinitely. The Russians had also been focusing in cutting the funding for this group which seemed to be coming from drug and arms deals made with organised crime groups like the Russian Mafia and in this matter they’d been successful. They’d cracked down on the Russian Mafia hard and had shared intelligence with Interpol allowing a huge number of arrests to be made and effectively removing the Brigade’s clients from the picture.

David’s thought process was interrupted by the car braking and he focused on his surroundings to find himself once again back in front of his hotel. Getting out, he bent down and looked through the window at Katya, saying, “If your offer still stands I promise to call you when I get a location. How can I reach you?”

Smiling she gave him a number and after noting it on his phone, he said goodbye and stood back up as the car pulled away. He waited for a moment, watching until the car was out of sight, before heading out of the heat of the afternoon and inside. Deciding he couldn’t be bothered to go back to his room yet, he instead went to the bar and ordered a beer.

The same bartender was working and he was still sweating heavily, causing David to wonder whether the man was just very sweaty rather than it being the temperature. The beer was quickly brought over and put down on the bar in front of him, and then the bartender walked off to look after another customer further down. Glancing down the room, David saw the customer in question was a young woman. For a moment their eyes locked and she gave him a smile, then another man sat at the bar and his view was blocked. Turning back to the full pint glass in front of him, he took a sip, casually patting his jacket as he did so, making sure the Browning was where he’d left it. He was nothing if not cautious even at the best of times and the morning’s events had put him on full alert. He was almost expecting an attacker hidden around every corner.

Then he focused on the business of unwinding and began to drink his beer with more enthusiasm, finishing the first in ten minutes and then immediately ordering a second. It was still early afternoon but despite that the bar had several patrons, one of whom, the young woman from before, seemed to be very interested in him, although he pretended not to notice. Having spent nearly half an hour in the bar and going through two beers, David was ready to leave, but just before he could someone sat beside him said, “Can I buy you another drink?”

Turning he saw the young woman sat on the next stool along. She was of average height with brown hair curled into elegant locks and brown eyes. She spoke excellent English but there was the barest hint of an accent he couldn’t place. It sounded like she hadn’t spoken it for a while though and was trying to remember how it went.

As he looked at her, something told him something was off; some sixth sense telling him this wasn’t just some lonely tourist. With this in mind, he decided the best thing for him to do was accept the woman’s offer and said, “Sure I’d love another beer, as long as you’re paying of course.”

Smiling the woman ordered a beer and a drink for herself before introducing herself to him. “I’m Émilie” she said, just as the drinks arrived. Pushing his over she then said, “and here is your beer. So how about you give me your name in return?”

Laughing David said, “I’m David Jones, pleased to meet you,” giving the fake name on his passport.

As they drank the pair indulged in small talk, idly mentioning where they were from and so on, however when they’d both finished their drinks, Émilie suggested that David come back to her room and they could spend more quality time together. Realising that once they were in her room he would have the chance to interrogate her, he agreed. So she led the way while he once again checked his Browning before following on behind.

Her room was on the second floor, halfway along the corridor and but it took over five minutes for them to get there, with David pretending to be drunker than he was and moving much more sluggishly and clumsily. She had no such difficulties though and quickly had the door open, holding it open for him, and he stumbled his way inside, keeping his head low as he went.

As he took the first step, a hand sailed over his head and struck Émilie in her chest. Using the moment of confusion that caused, he threw himself further into the room, diving under a second blow aimed at his head. As he landed on the carpeted floor, his hand slipped into his jacket and found the butt on the Browning before then drawing it in a single fluid motion and aiming it back towards the doorway.

Slowly getting to his feet, he looked at his would be assailants over the barrel of the pistol. They’d both frozen in the doorway, not daring to move with the threat of the gun facing them. Knowing he was in control of the situation, David began his interrogation.

“I think I’ve got some questions for the two of you,” he said. “Émilie, if that is your name,” he continued, “please shut the door, and then sit on the bed. The same goes for your friend.” As he spoke he punctuated his words with curt movements of the pistol, making sure they didn’t forget who had the gun.

Émilie nodded and slowly did as she was asked, closing the door with a single push, before going and sitting on the edge of the bed. As she did so, she spoke for the first time since the lift and said, “Alright, it’s done. As for introductions, my name really is Émilie and my companion is called Pierre.”

David couldn’t help but admire the way she kept her cool even when staring at the barrel of a gun and replied, “Well nice to know you didn’t lie about everything. Now perhaps you’ll tell me why you were trying to trick me in the bar and brought me up here. What was your plan, kidnap me? Interrogate me? Who are you working for? The Brigade of the Faithful?”

At this barrage of questions, Émilie managed to regain her composure right up to the last question about the Brigade. Then her composure slipped and it was replaced by shock, although she hid it well and quickly reformed her composed mask. “Wait,” she said, “you’re tracking them as well? Who the hell are you?”

David laughed loudly at that and answered, “I think I’ll be asking the questions while I’m training a weapon on you. Now perhaps you should start by telling me who the hell you are.”

“Okay, I’m an agent for French Intelligence. We’ve been tracking The Brigade of the Faithful for months. We believe they’re responsible for attacks across Europe including a recent one on the London Stock Exchange. We were sent here because our superior didn’t want an English agent to get to the enemy, so we were sent to find them first.”

This just had David laughing even more, “Well unfortunately for you, I’m the British agent sent to find and retire these terrorists. Sorry to disappoint you and now we have to answer the question of what happens now?”

“You’re the one with the gun, you decide,” she said. Hearing the slightly mocking tone in her voice, David decided it was time to stop hiding behind the threat of a gun and holstered it. Then he turned to the two French agents and thought about a way he could resolve both situations. A sudden wave of inspiration gave him his solution.

“How about I just let you go,” he said, “in return, when I have a location you can provide transportation and backup for me. That way we both get the credit and the terrorists are out of commission.”

Both Émilie and Pierre looked slightly surprised at his offer to let them help and speaking for both of them she said, “Okay we agree.”

“Just one condition though,” he interrupted before she could thank him, “any intelligence we find is mine and so is the leader Nathaniel if we find him. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” her reply had David smiling as he realised that in the space of a day he’d gone from no support at all to almost more than he could handle.

Still smiling, he decided it was only fair to let them know his true identity and said, “For the record, my name is David Ryder. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then he left the room behind him and stepped out into the corridor.

Once he was through the door he heard it close and lock behind him, then went up to his own room and went inside. Taking out his phone he dialled the safe house’s number and checked in with Mary.

She answered almost before the phone had a chance to ring and after exchanging pleasantries he said, “Just to give you a heads up I’ve found myself some back up out here. A couple of French Agents sent to beat me to the prize and Katya, who’s on the Russian team who briefed me earlier. How’re things going at your end, do we have a location?”

She was silent for a brief moment as she processed the new information, then said, “I’ll pass that on to the Director. In the mean time we have some kind of location. Youssef remembered a building the Brigade has been using on the outskirts of Cairo. It’s not the training camp but it’s definitely some kind of base for the group.”

As he listened, David wrote down the information she was giving him on a nearby pad of paper, but before he’d written more than half a dozen words, she stopped him and said, “I’ll send you an email with the details in a minute. Feel free to check it out, you might discover some intelligence regarding the camp and if not then at least you’ll take out another piece of their infrastructure. I’ll call again if we come up with anything else but if not I’ll talk to you again when you check in tomorrow afternoon. Keep safe David.”

With that Mary signed off and David immediately put his phone to one side and booted up his laptop to access the email she had said she would send. It came through shortly and as he opened it up he saw that the target building was on the outskirts of Cairo, to the south of Helwan. But rather than a single building, it appeared instead some kind of walled compound. Going went through the information he’d been provided about the place, he saw that rough estimates placed six to ten men inside the compound along with potential stockpiles of weapons. Realising it could be a supply base for the Brigade, he resolved to go and pay the place a visit tomorrow and see what was going on there, and he decided he’d ask his new French friends for transportation.

Chapter 28

He woke up the next day full of vigour; feeling that he was finally getting somewhere and making inroads in his mission. There was also a sense that he was now finally the hunter rather than the hunted. As he got out of bed and wandered through to the shower, he decided to visit the compound early and reconnoitre the place before trying to infiltrate it.

With this in mind, he took a short shower and changed into tan trousers with a white shirt, the look being rounded off by his shoulder holster and covered up by a tan jacket. Checking the look in the mirror, he made sure the Browning wasn’t making an obvious bulge in his jacket, and that it wasn’t easily visible, then left the room and went downstairs.

Taking breakfast in the attached restaurant, he ate a full meal and once his plate was empty took a few minutes to relax while he had the chance. With his appetite sated, he went back upstairs although this time in the lift he pressed the button for the second floor and walked along the corridor until he came to Émilie’s door which he knocked on lightly.

After a short delay he heard shuffling footsteps on the other side and the door opened to reveal Émilie, looking tired and dishevelled, and not at all pleased with the sudden interruption to her morning. Putting on a winning smile, he said, “Morning, I need a car for today, something with four wheel drive preferably. You wouldn’t happen to have something available would you?”

“Goddamit David, you woke me up to ask for a car?” she almost shouted at him, irritation clear in her voice. “Why do you need one anyway, have you learned something,” she then asked, curiosity and professionalism replacing her tiredness.

David, who’d smiled at her reaction, tried to play things down and said, “Maybe. I don’t have the main location yet but my people have found a secondary site that might be a warehouse. I’m going to check it out.”

As soon as she heard this, Émilie disappeared inside the room, leaving him standing in the doorway looking slightly bemused as he wondered what she was doing. All he could hear from inside was rapid footsteps going to and fro. Then from inside the room she said, “Wait in the lobby for me, and give me twenty minutes. I’ll give you with both a car and some back up.”

David couldn’t help but smile at the change in situation; a moment ago she’d been furious with him for waking her up, now she was hurrying to get dressed so she could come with him. For a moment though he was about to argue with her and say he worked better alone, but he just as quickly realised another set of eyes couldn’t hurt so he didn’t say a word. Instead he closed the door to Émilie’s room and headed downstairs to the lobby to wait for his new ally.

Émilie was better than her word and he only had to wait eighteen minutes before she breezed into the lobby, looking like she’d been up and ready for hours. He also noticed from the off that she’d dressed in suitable clothing for taking a trip into the desert. Meeting her in the middle of the room, he smiled, rather than said anything, and then followed her to the hotel’s garage where she climbed into a stripped out Land Rover. The vehicle was open topped with a roll cage rather than a roof, the back was a flat shelf with no seats at all and the front had two seats. As he looked at it, David though that it was the perfect vehicle for what they were going to do.

Then he noticed that Émilie was already behind the wheel and climbing into the passenger seat beside her, he said, “Let’s get going.” She had been waiting for him and now that he was ready she wasted no time in starting the V8 engine and guiding it out of the parking garage.

It wasn’t long before they were speeding towards the outskirts on Cairo and heading towards the suburb of Helwan. At this point David said, “Get off the road now Émilie. I want to approach the place from the desert rather than the obvious avenue of approach.”

Nodding she made sure there were no other cars in sight before jerking the wheel and sending the Land Rover spearing off into the desert where it was soon lost among dunes. Once they were out of sight of the road, he had her pull over. Once the car was stopped, checked the GPS unit he’d been given at the warehouse and programmed in the coordinates for the compound. That done he gave her the GPS unit to navigate and the Land Rover once again set off across the sand.

It took another twenty minutes of driving before the GPS unit told David he and Émilie were getting close to their destination. Telling her to ease off slightly, he kept a close eye on the screen as they got closer and closer. He only hoped the sound of the engine and wouldn’t be audible from the compound. Then, a few minutes later, the GPS indicated that they were only a few hundred metres from the compound and he had the car stop altogether. Now stationary, he turned to Émilie and said, “I’m going to go alone and check the place out, see if anyone’s home. I’ll be back in half an hour, if I’m not then leave and I’ll see you back at the hotel.”

She tried for a moment to protest, but before she managed to get a single word out, he overrode her and said, “I don’t intend to start anything now, I intend to go back in tonight for that. But I need to check the place out first; and I’ll be quicker and less conspicuous if I go alone. Once I’ve done a bit of checking, I’ll be back and we can plan what we’re going to do tonight.”

With that he got out of the Land Rover, threw his jacket back in so he wouldn’t overheat too much and set off, climbing the nearest sand dune. He climbed quickly up the wall of sand which constantly slid out from under his hands and feet as he continued to ascend it. His haste was partly born out of a desire to see the compound and partly because he was eager to be back at the hotel before it got too hot. It wasn’t long before he was at the summit and looking down he saw his target. It was an impressive structure that despite its size, blended into the desert on which it stood, ten metres below him.

It was at that moment that he wished he’d brought a pair of binoculars so he could examine the compound in detail before risking a closer look. But at that moment he heard movement behind him and turned to see Émilie crawling up the dune to join him. Rolling his eyes in irritation and exasperation, he slipped below the crest of the dune and intercepted her fully ready to give her a piece of his mind as he did so.

“What the hell are you doing? I told you to stay in the car?” he said, angrily, although taking care not to raise his voice too much, stealth was still crucial to the situation.

Émilie however just smiled and produced a pair of binoculars in one hand and a pair of radios in the other. “I just thought you might find these useful, but if not I could always take them back to the car,” she said, revelling in the slightly sheepish expression David was now wearing.

This had David smiling in spite of himself; in nothing else Émilie was determined. Then he accepted the binoculars and one of the radios from Émilie and motioned for her to join him at the crest of the dune. As she joined him, both lying prone on their bellies on the hot sand, he raised the binoculars to his eyes and began to examine the compound below.

It was made up of a perimeter wall, coloured tan to disguise it against its sandy background. Inside there was a large building jutting against the back wall and in front of it a couple of smaller brick buildings and a couple of corrugated iron sheds. It was a very functional layout, but the effort that must have been required to construct it suggested there was something important, and permanent, going on there. With the layout now fixed in his mind, David then focused on trying to make a rough count of those inside the compound.

Starting by skimming along the top of the wall he quickly counted three men patrolling different stretches. Then he moved his gaze inside the wall and spotted a further guard at the gate, almost invisible as he stood in the shade of the wall. Then over the course of the next ten minutes he counted a further three men moving between the buildings at one time or another. Having seen all he could from where he was, he decided to get a closer look at the wall and gate protecting the compound.

With this in mind he turned to Émilie who was still lying next to him, silent as the grave. Catching her eye, he held out the binoculars and said, “I’m going to go and get a closer look, take the binoculars and keep an eye on the place. If you see any movement close to me alert me on the radio, I’ll be on channel 1.”

Nodding she accepted the binoculars from him, and then he slowly crawled over the crest of the dune and began to make his way down towards the compound. Crawling on his elbows and knees he moved slowly but surely towards the wall; pausing every couple of metres to make sure he hadn’t been detected. His caution meant that it took a full five minutes to make it to the bottom of the dune and a further five for him to reach the foot of the wall; but he arrived without being noticed by any of the guards.

Pausing at the foot of the foot of the wall, he took out the radio and checked in with Émilie, saying, “Émilie? How am I doing?”

There was a brief burst of static before Émilie’s voice came through the speaker, and it was on full volume. Ignoring what his companion was saying, David spent a tense few moments wrestling with the radio as he struggled to find the volume control. When he eventually found it, Émilie had stopped speaking and he was forced to ask her to repeat herself.

“I see you David,” her voice said, her voice now at a much lower volume, “there aren’t any guards on your side of the wall but they are moving round and you can expect company within ten minutes so go carefully and finish quickly.”

“Understood, let me know if anything changes, over and out,” he replied then replaced the radio on the right side of his belt.

Then he drew the Browning from his shoulder holster, just in case, and began to examine the wall he was pressed against. It was made of mud brick and rose up for over five metres, and appeared to be very sturdy. He knew just by looking at it that trying to blow his way in using explosives would be a big job, and he was out of practice, not that he’d ever had much love for explosives anyway. Throwing that option out, he decided to check the gate and see whether that might provide an easier point of access.

Moving slowly, and not daring to move more than a step away from the wall, he crept along the stretch of wall closest to the dune Émilie was on top of, heading towards the front wall of the compound. This was where the gate was located, although before he even arrived he found himself faced with a problem. The approach had no kind of cover whatsoever and if he was seen he’d be killed by the guards before he could reach the relative cover of the wall itself. Then when he actually saw the gate he realised it was made of reinforced steel and knew it was unlikely that the gate could provide an entry point into the compound. If he did take that route it was almost certainly that he’d immediately end up in a crossfire from the walls and buildings. Under that kind of fire he doubted he be able to avoid being turned into Swiss cheese.

Deciding he wasn’t going to learn anything more from his current location, David began to slowly make his way back towards the dune, moving away from the compound as cautiously as he’d made his approach. Only a few minutes of crawling later however and Émilie’s voice could be heard urgently coming over the radio.

“David, freeze. Guard on top of the wall looking at the stretch of desert you’re currently moving through.”

Stopping dead, he buried his face in the sand and prayed that the guard would prove less than observant and not notice that large patch of brown hair and the white shirt lying on the desert floor rather incongruously. He lay there, completely frozen, for more than three minutes, although it felt a hundred times longer considering the situation he found himself in, until finally Émilie’s said, “The guard’s moved on. But get moving before another one comes around.” Her words brought him immense relief, but also a decision to make.

He knew Émilie was right, he had to move before another guard appeared on top of the section of wall; he doubted that his nerves could handle lying so still for such long again. So throwing caution to the wind, he lifted his head and began to crawl as fast as was possible up the dune. A mountain of sand that had taken him five minutes to descend earlier was climbed in less than half that time, and at the top he lay just behind the crest, breathing heavily with a relieved smile plastered on his face. Turning his head to his left he saw Émilie waiting for him, a similarly relieved expression on her face.

The two of them took a moment to take in some deep breaths and relax on the top of that dune, during which time Émilie quizzed David on what he had discovered.

Remembering everything he’d seen, he said, “Trying to go in by blowing a hole somewhere seems to be out, the walls and gate are too strong for it to be done easily and when I do get in it would be too easy to get surrounded and cut off by the enemy.”

“So how are you going to get in?” she asked with a quizzical expression on her face, “I’m assuming that you’re still planning on going in tonight.”

As she asked this, he found that the only answer he could give was to shrug his shoulders and say, “I don’t know yet. Something will come to me though.”

For a moment there was silence between the two of them before he realised how hot the sand was, and noted that the sun had moved quite a way through the sky since they’d left the hotel. With the hottest part of the day fast approach he turned to Émilie and said, “Come on, we need to be going.”

Moments later he was back in the passenger seat while Émilie sat behind the wheel and the Land Rover was once again speeding across the desert and heading towards the nearest road back into Cairo. As he sat there, his mind worked continuously on problem of how to get inside the compound. The fact was that while there were several possible solutions, none that he’d come up with allowed him to maintain the element of surprise, which was always a useful advantage to have. As for what he’d do once inside, that was easy to answer. He’d already decided that the most useful thing to do would be the liberal application of plastic explosives around the area and the elimination of as many militants as he could on the way. It would be a hit and run, get in, place the explosives, and get out.

As he busily considered things in the passenger seat, Émilie managed to navigate the Land Rover back into and then through Cairo and was pulling back up inside the hotel garage less than four hours after leaving that morning.

Getting out they walked back into the hotel and got into a lift that dropped her off on the second floor before carrying him up to the third floor. Walking into his room he took a moment to admire the view he had overlooking a large stretch of the centre of Cairo.

As he looked out over the city, a thought suddenly leapt into his mind and he immediately began to turn that thought into a plan. As this new plan began to ferment, he began to wonder how he could possibly manage to pull it off. The items he’d need were highly specialised and he wasn’t sure if he’d able to source it in half a day. Deciding to at least try however he first headed downstairs and knocked on Émilie’s door, which was shortly opened by Pierre, followed by an invitation from Émilie to come in.

Once inside he filled her in on his plan and asked her whether she had access to any of the items he needed to pull it off. Unfortunately a short phone call later had him stumped once again as he was told that she couldn’t get what he needed for that night. Refusing to be dissuaded however he returned to his room and took out his phone before dialling the number he’d used only the day before to contact Lynch.

After exchanging brief pleasantries with the man, he repeated the request he’d made to Émilie. There was then a long pause as Lynch went to check whether he had what was needed but unfortunately he couldn’t provide David with everything he needed for that night either and in the end David had to end the call with only half the items he needed and the most crucial tool still missing.

Running out of options he then called the only other people that might have what he needed, and could get it to him by that evening and seconds later he heard Katya’s voice on the other end of the phone. This time he spent slightly longer on the pleasantries before finally making his request. Again there was a long pause while Katya checked if she had what he needed, before finally she returned with the answer David had been desperately waiting for.

The Russian team didn’t have exactly what he was looking for but they did have something that would work just as well and Katya said she could have it there before five o’clock that afternoon. As he thanked her, David was thrown a curveball when she asked him what he needed it for. As he answered her, she immediately volunteered herself to help and knowing he wouldn’t be able to dissuade her, he asked her to bring along a couple of extra items and then said goodbye. She just replied, “Until tonight,” before signing off.

With everything organised he went back down to the second floor and asked Émilie whether she’d mind giving him the Land Rover that night. Her reply was, “Of course not, I’ll even drive for you. Knock on my door an hour before you want to go and that’ll give us time to ensure we have everything before leaving.”

Once everything was sorted, and with two extra bodies signed on to come with him, David went back to his own room and lay on his bed. He was tired and because he was unlikely to get much sleep that night he decided to get some rest beforehand.

Chapter 29

He was woken up by the sudden ringing of his phone. Blearily opening his eyes he looked around and saw his phone on the bedside table, still ringing loudly in the silent room. Reaching over he picked the handset up and saw that it was Lynch’s number. Accepting the call, he put the device to his ear and said, “What’s up?”

“I’m here with what you needed,” he said, keeping things short and sweet, “could you come down and collect it ASAP. I need to be getting off quickly.”

Immediately rolling out of bed, David rushed out of his room and downstairs to the lobby where he found Lynch, standing near the front desk with a large black bag at his feet. Picking up the bag Lynch offered it out to David who accepted it with a grateful nod and said, “Thanks Lynch, this’ll be exactly what I need.”

The man just nodded though, he was clearly in a hurry as one glance at his watch later he was back outside and driving away. No sooner than he was out of sight than, Katya appeared in another car driven by one of her colleagues. Hopping out she grabbed a couple of bags from the backseat of the car and it too left as she walked inside and joined him in the lobby.

“I’ve get everything you asked for in here,” she said, holding out one of the bags, before holding up the other one and continued saying, “plus a spare change of clothes for me. Shall we take it all to your room and you can go through it there?”

Nodding David led the way back to the third floor carrying the two bags full of equipment, while she followed on behind carrying the other bag. Once they were back inside his room, he excused himself momentarily and went to get Émilie while she began to unpack the equipment she brought.

It didn’t take long for him to return, Émilie in tow but even so by then Katya had managed to fully unpack the bags, and had laid it out on the bed for his inspection. Having quickly made the introductions, he then turned his focus to the bed and the equipment lying there, nodding his head with approval as he made a cursory examination.

The special equipment was all there, as the Russians had said it wasn’t exactly what he’d asked for but it would definitely serve his purpose. Then there were the extra items he’d asked for and Katya had excelled. He’d asked for two sniper rifles and she’d managed to find two Dragunovs fitted with night vision scopes. They were superb weapons with extended twenty round magazines and a semi automatic firing mechanism. The scopes looked to be NSP-3 night vision models that would be able to see through the darkness with ease.

Picking up the first rifle he checked action and made sure everything worked perfectly before returning it to the bed and checking over the second one as well. Satisfied that they were both functional, he turned to his two companions who clearly had questions to ask but had remained silent while he went over the equipment.

Looking at them he noted that Émilie seemed more impatient and said, “Okay what do you two want to ask, Émilie first.”

For a moment there was silence as she pondered how to phrase her question, but eventually she found the words and broke the silence, saying rather bluntly, “Who is this David and why are there two rifles on the bed?”

David could see that her question was the same as Katya’s and they were both wondering where the other fitted into his plan. Seeing that they were also desperate for an answer he put them out of their misery and said, “Perhaps I should have explained better. Katya, this is Émilie, a French intelligence agent. Émilie this is Katya, a member of GRU. Émilie is providing our transportation for tonight. Katya has supplied us with the special equipment we need for my plan. The two rifles are for you, I’m going to need you watching my back from the top of the dune, while I enter the compound.”

After he finished speaking there was complete silence in the room for a moment. Then at exactly the same moment both women replied that they had no problem with the plan. Happy that he had both of them onboard, David began to go over the plan in detail, using a drawing of the compound to visualise his points.

With the every detail of the plan explained, the three occupants of the room broke apart and began to finish preparations for the mission. Émilie went downstairs to change into a set of dark clothing to blend with the night sky. Katya meanwhile changed in David’s bathroom as he just changed next to the bed. He hadn’t thought to bring a set of black fatigues, but fortunately Lynch had been able to provide a set in his size. When the three of them reconvened, the two women checked their rifles while David checked his Browning and stocked up on magazines. Then he examined the special equipment he would need for that night. When all preparations had been completed everything was packed into two large bags and they left the room.

The trio headed straight to the garage, where they located the Land Rover they’d used earlier that day. Throwing both bags, which were heavy, into the back of the car, David then got into the back with them, allowing Katya to get into the front passenger seat while Émilie drove. Once they’d mounted up, Émilie started up the Land Rover and soon they were speeding towards the outskirts of Cairo and the compound they’d had visited only a few hours before.

As before, the drive out to the compound took over an hour, but it didn’t feel that long to the occupants. The adrenaline was already coursing through their systems as they anticipated the action that was to come and they were getting fired up for the challenges in front of them. Each of them had different ways of dealing with their excess energy, David ended up checking his Browning umpteen times during the drive, checking the draw was quick enough, and the slide was working smoothly.

Katya meanwhile went over the plan innumerable times both under her breath and mentally and Émilie, who was the least experienced, did the samea nervous edge to her voice as she went through each stage one after the other. For her it the first operation of this kind she’d been on and it would be the first time she fired a weapon in anger but she was determined not to let David down. This was more than a desire to appear professional however as he’d made a big impression on her in the short time since they’d met, and she now found herself hugely attracted to this foreign agent and desperate not to let herself down in front of him.

Eventually they arrived behind the same sand dune as that morning and the three agents, now almost hopping with energy got out. David grabbed the bag filled with the equipment he needed to get into the compound, while his companions pulled out their rifles, loaded them and checked the scopes were working fine. Then after a final check of everything, David led the way up the sand dune.

From the top of the dune the compound looked completely silent and David hoped it would stay that way as Émilie and Katya lay themselves down on the still warm sand and set their rifles up. Once they were in position, and he’d been given an all clear to approach the compound, he began to slowly but surely descend the sand dune, trusting in the cover of darkness to hide him and forsaking extreme caution for a degree of speed.

As he got closer to the wall, he went slower to reduce the sounds of his advance and when he could see the structure he dropped to his stomach and crawled the last few metres. Once in the shadow of the wall, he was in a position to open the bag and take out the special equipment he’d asked Katya to provide.

First there was the climbing rope, twice what he’d need to scale the wall just in case, then came two climbing ascenders to help him scale the wall and a descender as well to help if he needed to get out quickly. The final item he pulled out of the bag was a large rifle like weapon. It was in fact a spear gun and had been provided instead of the grapple gun he’d asked for, which the Russians hadn’t been able to provide.

Tying the climbing rope to the end of the spear protruding from the end of the barrel, he took out a radio and checked the situation with his guardian angels. “What’s it look like from there?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper, aware that even the slightest audible noise might bring a guard investigating.

“All clear, you can send up your rope,” the reply came moments later.

Relieved he took the spear gun and too four steps to move out of the shadow of the wall. From his new position he could see the top of the wall clearly. Then putting the spear gun to his shoulder he sighted a point within arm reach of the lip of the wall and yet low enough to not be easily noticeable by a patrolling guard. With his target selected, he squeezed the trigger and felt the recoil slam into his shoulder as the spear flew away, trailing the rope behind it, and slamming into the wall with a satisfying thud a mere split second later.

Ducking back into the shadow of the wall, he made sure the rope was secure by tugging on it sharply several times. Satisfied everything was secure; he grabbed the descender and slipped it inside his black combat jacket, then picked up the ascenders and began to climb up the rope, bracing himself against the surface with his feet. Climbing the five metre wall took him a full minute, he went slowly to reduce the noise he was making, he was wary of being noticed by a guard hanging on the rope halfway up.

Soon the top of the wall was in sight and a moment after that he reached the spear embedded in the mud brick, which signalled the end of the rope. Suddenly nervous at completing the climb, he let go of the rope with one hand and wiped the sweat on his palm off, then reached up, blindly feeling for the lip of the wall. After a few frantic seconds with all kinds of doubts passing through his mind, his fingers finally came into contact with the stone lip representing the summit.

Grasping the stonework roughly, he consolidated his grip before letting go of the rope with his other hand which had soon also found its way onto the lip of the wall. For a moment he just hung there, and as he did so discomfort began to burn in his shoulder as his injury told him that what he was doing was too much exertion. This providing the impetus he needed to summon a burst of energy and pull himself up the wall face and finally his head cleared the stonework and looked out over the still silent compound.

Hauling his entire body over the top of the wall, he crouched for a moment on the parapet and got his bearings before hurrying along the walkway to the nearest ladder which took him down to the ground.

Chapter 30

Now inside the compound, David was on full alert as he made his way to the large building. As he went he tried to be as stealthy as possible, keeping low and to the shadows to keep out of sight from any patrolling guards. He was also constantly on the alert for any movement inside the compound, he knew he was vulnerable and any movement might signal he was compromised.

The distance to the building wasn’t far but he took his time, prioritising stealth and eventually he made it without mishap and stood against the side wall of the building. now that he was against the build, he began to slowly work his way around to the front of the building and up to the wooden door set in the centre of the wall. The door was locked but it was a flimsy thing and a single shunt with the shoulder forced it open. The inside of the building was bright, with naked bulbs hanging from the ceiling giving off their harsh yellow light, and realising that he’d be framed in the doorway for everyone to see he ducked inside and closed the door quickly. Shutting the door as best he could, he took a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the different light levels inside before heading deeper into the building to investigate what secrets it held.

Meanwhile on top of the sand dune Émilie and Katya kept a careful eye on the compound even after he disappeared into the building. As they lay there, the two women chatted to pass the time, and as their watchful eyes saw David arrive at the door to the building, the topic turned to him.

“How do you know him?” Émilie couldn’t help but ask her companion.

Katya smiled at that, not that Émilie could see, before she said, “I met him on his first mission. I’d been captured and he got me out, destroying a terrorist training camp and killing several men as he did so. I didn’t trust him at first though and ended up putting a gun to his head before I believed he was really there to help me. After that we had a couple of days to get acquainted with each other and since then we’ve tried to keep in touch, although at times it’s been difficult.”

There was another short silence between the two women as Émilie thought about this story, and whether it was the truth because she was having trouble believing. David only looked like he was eighteen, but Katya was speaking as her story had happened years ago. there was something about her tone of voice that made it seem like she was remembering a time long past.

Katya meanwhile wondered whether to say something she’d been thinking about since meeting Émilie. Eventually though she broke her silence and said something that took Émilie completely by surprise. “You like him, don’t you?” Her tone made it clear that she was making a statement rather than asking a question.

For a moment Émilie was thrown. She’d had no idea she was being so obvious in her attraction that someone she’d never met before could see it. However Katya then brought both relief and heartache to her with what she said next. “It’s not that obvious,” she smiled as she said this, she’d gone through the same stage of being hugely attracted to David, although for her it had been a little different because he’d been so young when they’d met. “I just happen to know how easy it is to fall for David Ryder. I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed though,” she finished by saying, causing her companion to lift her face from the rifle and look at her directly

This piqued Émilie’s interest and even though she didn’t necessarily want to she couldn’t help herself asking the next question that popped into her mind. “Why will I be disappointed?” she asked, although her tone of voice made it clear that part of her didn’t want to know the answer because of the disappointment.

Katya’s smile by now had slipped to be replaced with a sympathetic expression as she said, “He’s not on the market to anyone from our profession. He follows that as a general rule I’m afraid, sorry to disappoint you.”

For several minutes after that the two women were silent before Émilie finally broke the silence. “I never had a chance with him, did I?”

“If you hadn’t been in our line of work, you probably would have had one,” Katya conceded, “you’re pretty, intelligent and gutsy. That would have gotten his attention at the very least. But because you are in this business, no you never had a chance. As I said it’s just a silly rule of his, its one of only a few he has for life in general. I never found out why, I just know that this is one of the few hard and fast rules he had.”

Émilie sighed at that, before returning her entire attention back to the compound because something seemed happening down there. Then David’s voice was suddenly heard over the radio, surprising both women.

“Two things ladies,” his voice said through the radio, “first don’t forget to let go of the transmit button on your radios when you’re talking otherwise, I have difficulty getting through and secondly when I give the signal I’m going to need some serious covering fire over here.”

Both Émilie and Katya groaned as they realised their entire conversation had accidentally been broadcast to him, and he no doubt had been listening carefully. But their personal embarrassment could wait as they now had a job to do and that was to make sure he got out of the compound alive, so he would get the chance to tease them about what he’d heard.

With that the two women carefully examined the compound through their scopes and identified several targets moving out of the smaller buildings and heading towards the larger one at the back of the compound.

Meanwhile David was currently wondering what the odds were that he would come out of this alive. He’d started by searching the bottom floor and moved up through the building. The first few rooms he’d gone through had contained nothing except basic living items and furniture, and were completely deserted but in the last room on the ground floor he’d struck lucky.

Initially he’d missed the small door, walking right past it before his mind processed what it. When he then returned to the door he found it was locked, but another shunt from his shoulder and it crashed open. Looking inside he saw the room was small, only about three metres squared and it was stacked full of wooden crates. Opening a couple he found AK assault rifles in one, freshly oiled and in factory condition, and in the other, which was smaller, he found bricks upon bricks of plastic explosive, plus detonators and clock timers. Seeing an opportunity, he grabbed several bricks of the plastic explosive and used the detonators and timers to rig a small arsenal of charges. Then, placing one inside the room, he continued his search upstairs, placing charges in several rooms as he went and setting the timers to detonate in twenty minutes.

Finding a flight of stairs, he moved upstairs to finish going through the building before then making his escape. It was then that things began to go wrong, as he reached the second floor; he came face to face with one of the terrorists, a loaded AK slung across the man’s chest. Reacting before the man had a chance to, he drew his Browning and fired two rounds in quick succession. The double tap struck the man square in the chest and he slumped to the ground, red pooling around the wounds. The damage was already done though and moments later he began to hear voices and movement throughout the building and outside in the rest of the compound.

Completing his search of the building as quickly as possible, he gave a cursory check of his watch and saw that he now had only five or so minutes before the first of his charges detonated. Even as he realised this, a hail of gunfire, from the end of the corridor he’d just searched, forced him to dive to the floor of the room he was stood in, cutting him off from the exit.

Readying his Browning, he leaned out of the doorway and saw there were two terrorists with AKs at the other end of the hall. Another burst of fire however forced him back inside, but when the rate of fire slackened off again, he threw himself into the corridor and from his position on the floor fired six rounds as quickly as he could work the trigger. One round hit a terrorist in the leg with a second slamming into the man’s head and sending him straight to the floor. The third and fourth rounds missed but the fifth round took the other terrorist in the shoulder, and David’s last round hit the man in the throat sending him to the ground to join his friend.

Now free to move, David didn’t hesitate and quickly made his way through the building to the door outside, reloading his Browning as he went. As he arrived at the door though and peered out into the compound through a gap he realised he had a big problem. In front of the door was a large group of armed men and as soon as the door opened, they all fired in his direction, forcing back inside the building which was due to explode in less than a minute. It was at that moment that his support stopped their conversation, which he’d managed to listen to throughout its entirety despite the gunfire, and he managed to send his message.

Getting his radio out, he said, “I need cover now, start hitting the guys right in front of the large building before I end up like burnt toast.”

Not bothering to say anything, both women immediately began to fire their rifles at the large number of targets grouped in front of the building he was in. This sent the men hurrying for cover and seizing his chance, David burst through the door and sprinted for the wall, firing his Browning at anyone who presented a target as he went.

As they looked through their scopes and added to the volume of fire, both Katya and Émilie couldn’t help but be impressed as they saw enemy after enemy fall to David’s fire, and what happened next took them even more by surprise. No sooner had he reached the ladder leading up to the wall than the first of his charges exploded, ripping a hole through the side of the building with a gout of fire erupting through the hole. Then moments later the other charges exploded and great sections of the building were ripped apart and the shockwave knocked him to the ground. He was back on his feet almost immediately though and continued to make his way towards the rope. As he ran, some of the few remaining guards fired at him from inside the courtyard and Katya and Émilie took them in quick order.

Less than a minute later and despite feeling a little bruised by the explosion, David was over the wall and back on the ground, casually walking up the sand dune while behind him the compound burned. He’d only stopped to collect the equipment he’d used to climb the wall.

As he crested the dune and stood next to Émilie and Katya, both of whom had stood up to greet him, he looked at the scene he’d left behind him and said, “Quite a mess isn’t it? I think we can consider that a job well done.” As he said this, he smiled and neither Katya nor Émilie would ever forget that smile. It was both the warmest and yet coldest and most ruthless smile they’d ever seen, and coming from someone so young made it all the more terrifying. It was the smile of a good man who had no problems doing awful things to protect innocent people.

Then the smile was replaced with a grin focused at them with all of the warmth and none of the ruthlessness and he led the way down the dune and back to the Land Rover and the prospect of getting a couple of hours sleep after all that night.

Chapter 31

On the drive back to the hotel David called Mary and gave her the good news. As he did so Émilie and Katya remained silent in the front exchanging periodic glances that conveyed an equal measure of amusement and apprehension as they wondering when or if he would mention what he’d heard over the radio.

Giving no indication that he’d noticed this however, David finished dialling the number and put the phone to his ear. After he a moment he heard the other end pick up and said, “Mary, the compound’s gone. Have you got any further updates for me?”

Mary’s voice on the other end sounded tired like she’d just woken up, but she sounded triumphant at being given the good news, saying “That’s good to hear. The analysts have been combing satellite imagery and comms chatter and they think they might have something. The caveat is they have two possible locations, one somewhere in Egypt, deep in the desert to the south, but they now think there might be a second site over the border in Libya. We talked to Youssef and he said he didn’t know anything about a second camp, but he did make the point that this Adir often keeps information compartmentalised. I’ve sent you all the information we have the Director wants to talk to you before you do anything.”

“Understood, I’ll let you get back to sleep now and we can check in tomorrow afternoon so he can talk to me before I decommission these camps.” His call finished, David switched his phone off and put it away before stretching his legs out in the back of the Land Rover and closing his eyes. Moments later he was fast asleep, despite the rocking of the car’s suspension over the rough roads as it carried on heading back to the hotel.

He woke up just as the car stopped in the garage to see both Émilie and Katya looking at him. “What did I miss?” he asked, as he rubbed his eyes and woke up fully.

“Not much,” Émilie replied, “we just had a conversation regarding sleeping arrangements tonight.”

“I was wondering whether I could stay with either of you guys tonight as it is rather late to be crossing the city to get back to the apartment I’m staying in,” Katya said, falling silent as she finished and for a moment there was complete silence until David realised they were expecting him to come up with a solution.

“That’s fine Katya. You can have my bed and I’ll kip in the chair; problem solved,” smiling at the simplistic way he just solved everything, Katya thanked him as they all got out of the car. David followed them, after taking a moment to grab the bags from the back, and they walked together to the lift which deposited Émilie on the second floor and David and Katya on the third floor. As soon as Katya got into the room she threw herself onto the bed and fell asleep almost immediately because she was so tired. David meanwhile, feeling refreshed after his sleep in the car, sat down in the chair and booted up his laptop to go over what Mary had sent him.

Moments later his screen was filled with the satellite imagery and fragments of text messages, phone calls and emails that had been the information the analysts had used to pinpoint the locations. The area for the Egyptian camp was far to the south, nestled in the rough and rocky terrain near the Libyan border. It was remote, unpatrolled and therefore an ideal location for a covert terrorist training camp to be located. The camp in Libya was in a similar setting roughly thirty miles south east of a small town called Umm Al Aranib. Despite all their hard work though, the analysts had still only been able to provide search squares of fifty kilometres on each side. There was a lot of territory out there and he knew he’d need another lead before he could finally pin the camp down to its exact location.

Even if he found the exact location, the fact was that they were likely capable of hiding dozens of men, which meant he was very likely to be massively outnumbered. On the plus side it was likely that the camps would only be temporary in case they needed to be moved at short notice, making it easier to destroy them and reducing the cover available to the occupants, although the same would be true for him. After an hour of going through everything, he put his laptop to one side and lay back in his chair, trying to get back to sleep what was left of the night away.

A floor below however, sleep was eluding Émilie who was facing internal turmoil at that moment in time. She was mortified that David had heard the conversation between her and Katya. But she was feeling even worse however because of the fact he hadn’t bothered to say one word to her since. She was sure that was because of what he’d heard.

Then there was the mission, she’d never fired a weapon in anger before that night and yet during one evening she’d killed at least three men. She’d pulled the trigger and watched the men fall and for a young idealist, it was difficult to come to terms with. The fact was that she’d extinguished three human lives regardless of what they’d done in their lives.

This mix of emotions kept het up until after dawn, despite her best efforts to put them aside, and when Pierre knocked on her door the next morning, she was absolutely exhausted, and looked it.

As bad as she felt after a night of no sleep and complete emotional turmoil, the news Pierre brought from their superiors made her feel even worse. “Pack your things,” he said brusquely, “we’re leaving today.” This had her instant attention and she immediately asked why. “Our superiors have decided there’s nothing more we can do here,” he replied, “the British have all the resources they need here and we aren’t an assault team so we have no business staying here any longer. Besides we have new orders and another assignment so we’re off back to Paris. Our plane leaves in three hours so get your things together and let’s meet up with the others.”

Nodding she wandered back inside and began to throw her things together into a bag. Perhaps it was for the best she reflected. At least she’d be away from David and that would give her the time to get over her feelings for him. But at the same time she couldn’t get away from the feeling that she was abandoning, and in a way betraying him, but orders were orders and she had to go.

She managed to pack everything together within fifteen minutes, and once her bag was full, she quickly washed and changed her clothes before giving the bags to Pierre. As he took them down to the garage, she went upstairs to tell David about the change of plans.

Knocking on the door to his room, she wondered whether she should even bother. He clearly didn’t care about her otherwise he’d have discussed last night’s conversation with her, so why would he care whether she was leaving. Before she could run away however the door opened in front of her. But instead of David standing in the doorway, Katya stood there, looking slightly sleepy and surprised to see her.

“Hi,” Émilie managed to say after a few moments of silence between the two women, “Is David up? My team’s been recalled to Paris so I just wanted to say goodbye.”

Katya smiled as she answered Émilie’s question, saying, “Him, get up this early in the morning? He’s a university student now and seems to be as lazy, take a look if you like.” With that she stood to one side and Émilie walked into the room to see him, seemingly fast asleep, in a chair in the corner of the room.

Turning back to Katya, Émilie asked her to pass on the message when a third voice suddenly entered the conversation, taking both women completely by surprise. “And what message is she supposed to be giving me Émilie?”

Turning, she saw that David’s peaceful and restful expression had been replaced by an alert expression, his eyes were open and he was looking at her, although he was still slouched in the chair.

Katya took the opportunity afforded to her and stepped outside into the hall to give David and Émilie some privacy to speak freely. Meanwhile Émilie passed on the news that she was leaving Egypt and going back to Paris to David, who surprised Émilie by looking unhappy at the news. “Well I’ll miss you Émilie,” he said, “but as you know orders are orders and there’s no sense disobeying them for the sake of taking out these terrorists. Was there anything else you wanted?”

Émilie considered just leaving at that point, certain that he had no interest in further conversation and wanted her to leave. But a sense of being unfairly treated and her naturally fiery nature caused her to stand her ground and call him out. “I just wanted to ask how you could be so callous towards me,” she said, allowing a hint of anger to enter her voice.

At this his expression turned to shock and he didn’t speak for a few moments. He found his voice again shortly though and asked, “What are you talking about?”

The fact that he was now pleading ignorance only increased her anger though and she replied, “I’m talking about the fact that you heard the conversation last night. You heard how I felt about you and afterwards you refused to say a single word to me. How am I supposed to feel?”

“I can’t believe this; you actually think I feel nothing at all towards you. That I simply don’t care? That couldn’t be further from the truth,” he retorted, also allowing an angry tone to enter his voice, and raising the volume slightly.

“Then what is the truth?” she asked now standing in the centre of the room, arms akimbo and clearly readying herself for a fight.

“The fact of the matter is that you are exactly the kind of person I could see myself settling down with in the future. But in this line of work it simply wouldn’t work. I mean you work for French intelligence and I doubt they’d react well to find an agent or theirs is involved with an agent for a foreign intelligence agency. At best they’d do nothing, but far more likely is that you’d be fired. Worst case scenario is that you might be charged with a crime and go to prison. So no matter what I feel, the best thing to do is just keep things professional with other members of this world.”

As he explained himself, he could see Émilie’s stance softening slightly and pressing his advantage he continued to say, “As for last night, yes I heard your conversation but the reason I never said anything about it was I was tired and slept the entire journey back. I simply didn’t have the energy to go over it there and then. In fact I was planning to talk to you today about all of this, but circumstances seem to have rendered that plan moot.”

As he finished speaking, he rose out of his chair and crossed the room until he was standing just in front of Émilie, at which point he warmly embraced her. The hug lasted only for a few second before there was a knock on the door and Pierre’s voice could be heard coming from the corridor, saying, “Émilie, sorry to break things up, but we need to be leaving now.”

Breaking away from David, she gave him a peck on the cheek before leaving the room and leaving with Pierre. Meanwhile he just stood in the doorway and watched her leave while Katya came back into the room. “How’d the conversation go?” she couldn’t help asking.

“As well as could be expected,” he replied, before he disappeared into the bathroom to get a shower. Meanwhile Émilie had reached the garage and had gotten into the car Pierre had arrived in. But before the car could leave, a group of men suddenly appeared out of the shadows and produced a variety of weapons, all trained at the pair, who had no other choice but to surrender.

Seconds later both of them were bundled into the back seat of their car with crude blindfolds over their eyes and their hands bound. Then the sounds of the front doors could be heard as two of their assailants got into the car and almost immediately the car’s engine could be heard and it began to drive away. Meanwhile the other assailants followed on behind in the car they’d brought with them.

They left behind them no evidence of what had happened and no sign of their presence and it wouldn’t be for half an hour that anyone realised Émilie and Pierre were gone. It was only when they didn’t show up in time to catch their flight; forcing their team to miss it, that their absence was noticed and their team went looking for them both. It was then David was involved and he was the worst possible person for the terrorists to have hunting them.

Chapter 32

The French team struck over three hours after the kidnapping. It had taken them that long to first notice Émilie and Pierre’s absence and then work out their last known location. At that point the entire team rushed over to the hotel, convinced that David had something to do with the disappearance of their agents.

The first David knew of the situation however was when there was a knock at the door and he immediately found himself staring down the barrels of three black pistols. Backing into the room with his hands raised, he wondered who the men were and what was going on. It was obvious they weren’t members of the Brigade because they hadn’t killed him on sight. He was also kicking himself for being so careless. At the very least he should have looked through the peephole before opening the door, better would have been if he’d taken the Browning to the door with him.

As his three men aimed their weapons at David, the leader of the team stepped forward and said, “I want the locations of my agents now. If you cooperate I won’t kill you, and I’ll just prosecute you for kidnapping my agents instead.”

At this the man spoke the first thing David noticed was the slight French accent, and he immediately knew who had gone missing. Still unable to believe it though David’s eyes narrowed and he said, “What do you mean? Who’s gone missing?” as he spoke his allowed his voice to become edged with anger, as he waited for confirmation on his suspicions.

The other man just ignored David though and continued his line of question, “Don’t play dumb with me. We know they were here last and I want you to tell me where you’ve put them right now or else things are going to get much less civilised in here.”

At this point David exploded with rage. He was being given the run around by this guy without any kind of explanation and the prospect of a friend’s life hanging in the balance had him furious. Taking a step forward in spite of the menacing weapons trained on him, he said, “How about you stop messing me around and tell me what the hell’s happened because I don’t know. I have no idea which of your agents have gone missing, let alone where they are but seeing as you’re holding me at gunpoint I’d say I’m involved in this situation now. So why don’t you tell me what you know and I can tell you how I can help get your agents back.”

At the sudden venom issuing from David, the leader finally began to accept he had no idea what was going on. As he accepted this, the leader nodded to his men and they lowered their weapons. As things in the room calmed down, the man motioned for David to sit in the chair, which he did, as he outlined the situation. “About an hour ago we were supposed to catch a flight to Paris, but Agents Baudin and O’Connell didn’t appear. We did our best to track their movements but the last place we know for sure they were at is here.”

“By Agents Baudin and O’Connell, I assume you mean Pierre and Émilie,” David forced himself to ask, worrying about the answer but he wanted to be sure he understood the situation.

“Yes, now you said you’d help me. Does that mean that you know something? Perhaps who’s taken them?” the man asked, worry clear in his voice, which made David take a warming to him. The fact he cared about his team was something that made anyone a good leader, and the respect the rest of his men were showing towards him was another testament to his worth.

“I have an idea of who might be behind it,” David answered, looking the man in the eye as he spoke, “it’s the very men both you and I are here to get rid of. I might even have a location. Last night I was sent the results of a search for the Brigade of the Faithfull’s camps in this region. There might be two, one in here Egypt and the other in Libya. Both are far to the south of here, in the middle of the desert. If this group is behind this then they’re the most likely places for Émilie and Pierre to have been taken.” Having said everything he knew, David sat back in the chair and waited for the leader’s reaction which would determine whether he’d be taken seriously.

Soon enough the leader replied, fortunately it was exactly the reaction David was hoping for, as the man said, “Okay so what do we do? If you’re right then we know who and where; now how do we resolve the situation without my agents ending up dead?”

David shrugged, before giving the truthful answer to the man’s question. “I have no idea,” he said, “our analysts could only give search squares of fifty kilometres in all directions, meaning there’s a lot of ground to cover. When I come up with a solution I’ll let you know. In the meantime I’d be checking the news channels and internet; this isn’t a normal thing for these guys to do so if they’re acting in this way then they may give a reason for it. Now I’d better call in with my boss, he’ll want an update on the situation.”

Nodding the leader of the French agents told his men to leave and made to do so himself, before he went through the door however he put a card on the sideboard of the room. “If you find out anything new then let me know and I’ll do the same. I hope to be hearing from you soon.”

With that the man walked out, leaving David with an entirely new set of problems to deal with. He’d now have to adopt an entirely different strategy to assault the camps and he was now feeling massive emotional turmoil and upheaval at the situation his friend now found herself in. Then his professionalism took over and he picked up his phone and called Mary, asking to be put on with the Director.

Moments later the man himself could be heard over the phone. “Agent Ryder?” the man said, sounding s little tired, “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you, has there been a development?”

“Sir, the situation has escalated.” As David spoke he wondered how to best express the change. Eventually he opted for sheer bluntness and said, “I’ve been sharing Cairo with a team from French Intelligence, who were this morning reassigned to Paris and meant to catch a flight. However two members of their team never made it to the airport and the indications point to them being kidnapped by the Brigade. I was wondering whether we had any resources we can use to try and ascertain whether the agents have been taken by the group and where they are.”

When the Director spoke again, his voice was grave. He knew the potential seriousness of the situation and he also knew how he’d be feeling if it had been his agents who’d gone missing. “Tell me what you need and I’ll get it to you within a day,” he said, surprising David with the unconditional nature of the assistance.

David, who’d been hoping for that, breathed a sigh of relief at this decision and immediately outlined what he was thinking. “If the Brigade is responsible, the agents will have been taken to one of the two training camps in the desert, it’s the obvious place.” As he spoke, David began to pace around to room, trying to release some of the nervous energy that had been building up in his system. “If we have any kind of aerial surveillance, satellites, drones, whatever, if it’s in the area get them to check out the search areas. That’ll tell us where the agents are and give me the intelligence I need to plan an assault on the camps, destroy them, neutralise the terrorists and save the agents if they’re present.”

As he finished speaking there was a long silence on the other end, although in the very background he could hear the muffled sound of the Director saying something to someone. Then the Director picked the phone back up and said, “I’ve got every asset we can bring in heading over the search areas. I’ll also place a call letting the French know we’ll do everything we can to retrieve their agents and I’ll let the Egyptians know you’re operating on their turf. That might make it easier to leave the country after you destroy the camps.”

For a moment there was a pause as someone said something to the man and he was forced to reply to them. Then, after only a moment, he said, “I’m also sending you some back up, a few old friends from Hereford. They’ll be flying in on a military transport and will meet you at the hotel when they arrive. In the meantime follow up any other avenues and try to confirm if the agents have been taken by the group. Also make sure to cooperate with the French agents on the ground and help them follow up any leads. In the meantime I’ll get whatever I can, headed your way to help.”

With that the Director switched off, leaving David to make a call to the leader of the French team. It was earlier than he’d intended but then again things had moved quicker than he’d expected.

Chapter 33

Émilie slowly regained consciousness, but even as she did so she knew something was wrong. For one thing she couldn’t move and when she tried to find the cause of this the bindings around her wrists bit into her skin. The sudden pain brought her immediately to her senses. Looking around the first thing she noticed was that she was in an old fashioned cloth tent. Then looking down she noticed the sand and realised she was a long way from Cairo.

Then the tent flap was drawn back and two men walked in. They were dressed in combat fatigues and were heavily armed with rifles over their shoulders. Then she noticed the bowed figure between them and realised with a start that it was Pierre. The bruises on his face made it clear that he’d been badly beaten and he was barely conscious judging by the way his feet were dragging on the floor. Dropping him onto the sand, the two men gave him a couple of kicks to the ribs before turning to Émilie.

“Don’t worry dear, when we’re finished with your partner here, we’ll have a lovely chat with you.” One of them said; a broad and sadistic grin on his face as he looked her up and down. By the way he licked his lips she knew he liked what he saw.

She shivered at that, despite the heat, as fear began to course through her. Fortunately a voice then came from outside the tent and the men just walked out, leaving the captives where they were. Unable to move to help Pierre, Émilie began to pray that someone would find them before the men decided to have their chat with her.

Meanwhile on the other side of the country, David was brought awake by the sound of knocking on his door and wearily got to his feet. He hadn’t slept well the night before; the few moments he had dropped off he’d been confronted with nightmares of finding Émilie’s body in the desert. As he walked to the door and opened it, he received a welcome surprise. There were four men standing there, all of them carrying large heavy bags and dressed in desert fatigues. Stepping forwards, one of the men threw his bag at David, smiling broadly as he did so.

“Alright Ryder, long time no see. Glad to see you haven’t gone soft since we last saw each other,” he said as he walked past David and into the room, followed by the rest of the men.

Closing the door behind them, David smiled and replied, “Hey Elliott, how’s life been going for Lieutenant Wilcox of 22 Reg SAS?”

“It’s captain now, thank you very much. You know what the life’s like; busy, every day a new adventure and another chance to get shot in the line of duty. Standard stuff really. How’s it been with you? I hear though that you have a situation and need a bit of help so here we are, ready to pull you out of both the frying pan and the fire.”

David laughed at that before shrugging, “Same old, same old mate. I’ll get you up to speed on the latest.”

An hour later and he’d gone through everything, getting all four men completely up to speed. He’d told the whole story from the attack on the Stock Exchange to the present and leaving nothing out. As he finished speaking, Elliott asked the one question he didn’t have an answer to. “So what’s the plan?”

“There isn’t one yet,” David replied truthfully, before explaining, “We just don’t know enough about the camps to have any kind of plan, we don’t even know if this group is responsible for the kidnapping so for now we wait for new intelligence. The Director’s authorised the use of any and all resources available so we won’t be waiting long but for now there’s nothing we can do.”

At that moment David was saved from any more questions by the ringing of his phone. Answering it, he heard the voice of the French team leader on the other end and the news he had wasn’t good.

Five minutes later he switched off and brought the other men in the room up to date on the latest developments. “That was a call from our French friends,” he said, “it seems the kidnappers have released a message detailing that they are holding the two missing agents. It seems the Brigade is responsible.”

With that he opened up his laptop and quickly found the video that had been posted online. As he watched he garnered all of the intelligence he could. The background suggested it had been filmed in a tent, there were six armed men guarding two captives. The statement read by one of the men was in English rather than Arabic, meaning it could be understood the world over and there at the end was the sentence David had been waiting for.

As he finished his speech, the man in the video said that the Brigade of the Faithful was holding two French agents because they’d tried to interfere with the Jihad. There was also a warning that any attempts to rescue them would result in the deaths of the captives.

Watching the video several times in a row, David tried to glean every possible detail he could. Most of the men were holding AK’s, but the speaker was armed with a large calibre revolver rather than a rifle. There were at least seven men in the camp, but there’d likely be more and the captives were still alive. Then there was the speaker’s voice, it was accent less, implying the man was well educated and used to speaking English, possibly suggesting either a western education or a period living there.

Then David picked up the phone again and called Mary. She was already aware of the video and before he could even ask she reported that the video had been posted from an internet cafe in the centre of Cairo, making it almost untraceable. With that lead closed off to him, and his hopes of a location completely dashed, David ended the call and sat back in the chair, wondering what the video meant.

The fact that the Director’s assets already seemed to be providing information, he hoped wouldn’t be long before there was some hard intelligence about where the hostages were being held. In the mean time all David could do was wait, and all the five men decided that they’d be more comfortable waiting in the bar over a few of beers, even if it was only mid morning.

As they sat in the bar, enjoying the cold beer, David reacquainted himself with the four men that he’d first met nearly three years ago when he’d been sent to Hereford to train with the toughest soldiers on earth. For the sixteen year old those eight weeks had been the hardest off his life. He’d been driven to physical and mental exhaustion and never in his life had he wanted to quit something on so many occasions.

There had been four weeks of near constant marching in the fitness stage followed by four more doing weapons training in the initial continuation training. After eight weeks at Hereford the men he’d been training with went to Borneo for their jungle training while he remained behind for a last week which was spent doing Survive, Escape, Resist, Extract training. Then the finish everything off he’d been subjected to a four day evasion and interrogation test to ensure he could cope with the pressure. After that he’d gone back to London where he’d been given his first mission, while the other men went on to become fully fledged members of the regiment.

Finding himself back in the company of these men, David couldn’t help but notice how life in the regiment had changed all of them. They seemed more reserved initially but then they’d play a joke on one another and David saw the young men he’d known reappear.

But while he was observing his friends, they were observing him in turn. They’d all heard the stories and they knew of David’s reputation. They knew that the sixteen year old they’d met had turned into one of the best operatives in The Department. They knew that the years hadn’t been kind to him; he’d faced situations just as tough as the ones they were subjected to and had excelled. When they’d first met him he was still grieving for his parents and struggling to come to terms with how his life had changed, looking at him now the men could all agree on one thing. David had replaced his grief with steel and they had no trouble believing some of the more unbelievable stories they’d heard about David in the field, now that they’d seen the change in him.

As David sat in the bar drinking beer, Émilie was struggling to keep her composure. She’d been left alone for several hours, but once the hottest part of the day was over the men came back and took Pierre away again. But this time one of them stayed behind in the tent and she knew as soon as she saw him pull the tent flap down, that she was in trouble. The man started just by circling her, making her feel uncomfortable enough but the feeling of his eyes fixed on her body increased that discomfort tenfold.

After a couple of minutes of this, the man came to a halt in front of her and stared her in the eye until she dropped her gaze. As she did this, his fist slammed into her stomach. Not expecting the blow she was completely winded and would have ended up doubled up on the ground if her bonds hadn’t prevented it.

Breathing heavily she raised her gaze back up to the man’s and what she saw there made her blood run cold. The man was smiling and Émilie knew he was enjoying every moment, a fact that was confirmed when his smile broadened even further when he struck her again and again and again.

As the beating continued, Émilie tried to retreat inside her mind. She’d been trained to resist interrogation but here she wasn’t being asked anything. This was just senseless violence and she couldn’t cope with that fact. So she did her best to ignore the pain and the blows and remain as impassive as possible. It didn’t work.

After being beaten for several minutes she couldn’t summon the willpower to block out the pain she felt at every blow anymore. As her reactions became more visible, and her cries of pain louder, she could her assailant enjoy himself even more with every punch.

Eventually the man changed tactics and rather than continue the barrage of blows on Émilie’s body, he hit her in the head, hard. For Émilie this brought the release of unconsciousness and she slumped against her bonds, her head lolling between her tied arms. Realising he’d lost his sport, the man lost control and continued to attack her in an enraged frenzy that lasted for a only a few seconds. But Émilie was spared the pain of the blows and eventually he regained control and left her hanging there.

Pierre was brought back fifteen minutes afterwards having been beaten again, but after the guards left the tent he was able to gently shake Émilie awake. As she regained consciousness, she did her best not to show how much pain she was in from her beating. After all Pierre had taken two beatings and hadn’t uttered a work of complaint, but she couldn’t help but pray for the first time in her life. She prayed for someone to find her quickly, before her captors got creative in the ways they made her suffer.

Chapter 34

David sighed as he got off the phone with Mary, having learned nothing new. It was now the fifteenth of April, six weeks after he’d left University, a week since arriving in Egypt, and a week and a half to his birthday. It was also four days since Émilie and Pierre had been kidnapped.

Everyone had been working flat out to try and ascertain their exact location and produce some intelligence on the camp but so far their efforts had been in vain. The most frustrating thing was that they had a good idea of where the captives were being held but without a precise location and other intelligence, to try and go in would likely result the deaths of everyone involved including the captives. So instead he just sat in his hotel room or the bar with his team, waiting for something to change.

His team all felt the same way, but they weren’t as frustrated simply because they hadn’t met Émilie or Pierre. In short they weren’t emotionally involved in the situation. David however couldn’t help but constantly wonder what was happening to Émilie and every scenario he came up with was a form of mental torture.

Meanwhile deep in the desert, Émilie was waking up to usual dose of pain. Since being kidnapped she’d been subjected to several beatings, limited food and water and mock executions, all of which had driven her close to despair. When she prayed every night now, it wasn’t for a rescue but death to end the suffering. She had no idea how close it would get to that though.

The first thing that anyone knew of the attack was the sound of a car engine approaching at full speed. The Brigade weren’t expecting a visitor, which meant whoever was approaching was an enemy. With that knowledge everyone in the camp began reaching for weapons and tumbling out of tents, preparing for whoever was approaching.

Then the Jeep came into view. There were four men inside, all of whom holding automatic weapons which they began to fire as soon they saw the camp, the light tent fabric showing up against the night’s sky. But their fire was erratic and inaccurate because of the movement of the Jeep as it bounced over the sandy surface and the terrorists seized their chance, overcoming their surprise.

Soon the Jeep’s bodywork was resonating with successive hits from the terrorists’ AK’s and under the barrage of fire; one of the men in the Jeep was killed by a stray bullet to the head. The next moment, another of the terrorists fired an RPG at the vehicle. The rocket detonated underneath the car flipping it like a child’s toy. Charging forward, the terrorists searched the car, finding two of the occupants still alive. Dragging them out of the wreckage they took them back into the camp. Meanwhile the Jeep, which was destroyed but had salvageable components, was towed into the camp by a Land Rover. More men quickly dug a shallow trench into which the bodies of the two dead attackers were carelessly thrown in and then the sand replaced over the top.

Meanwhile the men still alive were being interrogated and within half an hour the camp’s commander knew everything. With no further use for the men, the Commander decided to send a message and told one of his men to bring a video camera, and for all the captives to be brought in. The Brigade was going to send a stark message to anyone that dared oppose them.

In Cairo, David only knew what had happened when he got a call on his phone. It was Mary and she had no time for pleasantries. Instead she just told him to go to a specific website and as he accessed the site his blood ran cold. On the screen in front of him there were four people kneeling in a line. Two were Émilie and Pierre, the other two he recognised as members of the French team. Behind them was the speaker from the first video. He was armed with a large stainless steel revolver and brandished it as he walked up and down the line of captives. As he went he ranted, this time speaking in Arabic rather than English, which alone was enough to give David an insight into the man’s anger.

While David couldn’t understand what the man was saying, the way it was said told him that this man was not a man to be trifled with. This was proven seconds later when the man stopped speaking and stood behind the first of the captives. It was one of the other French agents. Without warning the man raised his revolver, which looked like a Colt Anaconda, chambered in .44 magnum. The barrel of the revolver hovered behind the man’s head for a moment, then the finger tensed, a gout of flame exited the barrel and as it did so a plume of red mist appeared from the man’s head as he fell face forwards onto the ground. Undisturbed by the sight for even a second, the executioner just moved on to the next hostage in line, continuing to speak throughout. After speaking for a few moments, the executioner once again raised his weapon, there was another shot and a second captive pitched forwards, face first onto the ground.

For a third time the executioner moved to stand behind a captive, this time Pierre. There was another short speech and the revolver came up again, there was another shot and Pierre joined his two teammates face first on the ground. Finally the executioner came to stand behind the last living hostage, Émilie and in that moment David silently prayed that he wouldn’t see that revolver come up again and fire another round. But there was no shot; instead there was another rant from the executioner who punctuated his words with frequent hand gestures. Then he grabbed Émilie by the hair and forced her to look into the camera before suddenly the screen went black.

Seizing his phone, David called Mary back instantly and it wasn’t long before she answered her voice thick with emotion. “Mary, I need to know what he was saying, can you get me a translation for five minutes ago please? Also get onto French Intelligence, it was their men who were executed, maybe they have an idea where their agents went and what the hell they were trying to do.”

“I’ll get you that translation in a couple of minutes and do my best on the other stuff. In the meantime the Director wants you and your team ready to go at a moment’s notice. I’ll get going on this stuff, and you’d better inform your team of what’s happened and then make sure you’re ready to go as soon as we have any answers on this end.” With that Mary hung up and David walked out of his room and knocked on the doors of the two rooms his team were staying in.

At each door he gave the same short statement. “Get over to my room, things have changed and there’s something you need to see.”

Seconds later all four of the team were in the room and watching the video of the executions in stunned silence. They all watched it all the way through in complete silence and when it was finished David told them to check their equipment and be prepared to leave the hotel at a moment’s notice, in fact as soon as there was any intelligence to go on. Immediately the men went back to their rooms, they knew the stakes had changed and the chances of Émilie now coming back alive was far less than it had been a few hours ago.

David remained in his room when his phone buzzed and he saw Mary had sent him a text telling him the video had been translated and a copy sent to his email. Opening up his email, he clicked on the attachment to the email he’d just received and the video opened in a new window. It was the same as before but this time when the executioner spoke, it was in English not Arabic. As he listened to the man’s speech there was little initially to interest him, mostly he talked about the evils of western society and the purity of his cause and so on.

As he took up a position behind the first captive however the man changed tact and David began to listen more intently. “You have decided to oppose the cause we stand for and therefore we will wage war against you. These men are agents of France and let this be a message to their country and the rest of the West. We will not be silenced, our cause will not fail and you will be defeated. Let all who would oppose us take not and know that if you stand in our path then you will pay the penalty.”

As the man finished speaking he fired for the first time, and as he watched the first captive fall to the ground, David continued to concentrate to what the man said next rather than concentrating on the sight of the dead man. “These men will die now and their government is responsible. It put these men in our path and now we will send our message.”

This statement was punctuated by the second shot but again David focused on the words rather than the visual aspect of the video. “Let this prove that we are not to be underestimated, and to those who would oppose us thing of the lives of those under your command.”

With that the third shot rang out and Pierre fell forward as the man moved behind Émilie and kept talking. “We have now shown our resolve and to show we aren’t heartless this woman will not be killed now. If there are any attempts to rescue her however then she will die, painfully and slowly in front of the men who try to rescue her and then they will die. Now look upon the face of this woman, her safety lies in the hands of her superiors. I’d advise them to keep that in mind before doing anything rash.”

Once again the screen went black, but the message of the executioner stayed with David even after the video was over. He knew the man was deadly serious when he said any attempt at a rescue and he’d kill Émilie, which gave him had two choices. Get to her first or kill the man first. Of course, he thought, he could do both when it was time to attack the camp.

At that moment his laptop pinged and he looked at his email again to see that Mary had come through for him again. As he read the email, full of hope that it would contain the smoking gun he was looking for, he was severely disappointed. According to French Intelligence their agents had been given orders to hold off until more information had been gathered and the agents’ superiors had no idea where they’d gone. It seemed therefore that the agents had gone rogue and hadn’t shared their plans with anyone, meaning he was no nearer to discovering where Émilie was being held.

This was all in the first half of the email and he very nearly didn’t read the second half so depressed was he at the lack of useful information. But by accident he glanced down and moments later he was glad of it. Analysts had examined the origin of the video and joy of joys it had been broadcast live from the camp itself. The terrorists had been sloppy and they’d now pay the price for that. He now had their location and it was in the Egyptian desert.

As he read this he heard his phone ring and picked up to hear the Director’s voice on the other end. “You have the location now, I give you full freedom to act as you see fit but I want your team to act immediately. I want to bring at least one of those French agents home.” The Director signed off at that point, leaving him to plan how to conduct his assault and get his team together to prepare them for the attack. It was then that he had a brainwave as he remembered the history of the SAS and in particular their desert actions during World War Two. Minutes later he was busy creating a plan that was ambitious, dangerous and damn near suicidal with not a lot between success and failure.

Chapter 35

The desert was silent as the team crept through the darkness, slowly but surely approaching their target. They were dressed in desert fatigues, heavily armed and ready for anything to happen. Leading the five men through the darkness, David took a knee for a moment and looked at his GPS unit. As the screen lit up in the night’s sky, he saw that they were only about a hundred metres away from their target and nodded to the other men who paired up and split off, vanishing into the darkness.

As the rest of his team moved away, David continued on alone, creeping directly towards the camp. His AK was clutched close to his chest and he constantly monitored the darkness for any signs of movement. He knew if the alarm was raised then Emilie would likely be killed and everything would end in failure. Fortunately there were no signs of any sentries keeping watch for any intruders and it wasn’t long before the camp itself camp into view.

It was hidden in a hollow created by rising sand dunes on every side with a single broad avenue coming in from the north. Looking down from the eastern ridge, he took a moment to examine the sight in detail. He’d seen some blurry satellite pictures of the camp, it had been the best the analysts could do with the limited time they’d had available, but there hadn’t been much detail on the pictures.

Looking down he took in the tents, arranged organically rather than according to any pattern, with a larger tent in the centre. In the North Western corner several vehicles were lined up, camouflaged with netting and there seemed to be several large oil drums likely full of fuel. In the south there was what looked like a firing range set up for the camp’s occupants. Taking an extra moment David looked more closely at the larger central tent. That would likely be the command centre for the whole camp, he thought, and Émilie was probably being held captive nearby. Having seen everything he needed to, and now slightly behind schedule, David took a deep breath began to move down the sandy slope and into the camp.

While the rescue team were infiltrating the camp, Émilie was regaining consciousness after yet another beating. The pain that nearly overwhelmed her the second she regained consciousness was just another reminder of the day to day life she now had to endure. Tied once again to the centre tent post, all she could do was stand there wondering what was going to happen next. That was the worst thing she could have done though as her mind instantly filled with all kinds of horrendous images and scenarios and she could then only thing about how much she hoped none of it would happen.

Suddenly the tent flap was drawn back and the man she feared most of all walked in. He was the Commander’s second in command; she’d heard some of the other men call him Khaled, and he terrified her. Whenever he beat her, he seemed to enjoy it and he always had a smile on his face as he started to rain blows down upon her.

Another thing was that she could always feel his eyes roaming her body when he was in the same room as her. More than once he’d paused a beating to allow his hands to linger for a moment on her body, usually her breasts, thighs or buttocks. But she’d quickly learned not to say a word, the first time she’d tried to protest he hadn’t stopped as she’d hoped, instead he continued his attentions, then he’d beaten her to unconsciousness. She got the feeling that if he was given free reign, he would have no problems doing everything she feared most. There was also something unhinged about the man, he could slip into a rage at a moment’s notice and for no reason whatsoever.

For a few minutes Khaled just walked around her, circling her as a shark does its prey. Once again she could feel his eyes taking in every aspect of her appearance, which was by now very dishevelled, although at least her modesty was still protected, her captors hadn’t taken that from her yet. Then Émilie’s fear of the man grew even further as he spoke to her for the first time.

“You know I’ve been asking for permission to teach you a real lesson ever since you were brought to the camp,” he said from behind her, his hands resting for a moment on her shoulders before rubbing her upper arms. Then he walked back around to face her and said, “I’ve repeatedly asked to be allowed to teach you how vulnerable a woman is but every time I’ve been denied, until tonight. The Commander has finally given me permission and now I’m going to have my way with you and I’m going to enjoy it.”

As she heard this, Émilie shivered, she knew her worst fears were about to come true. As this thought passed through her mind, Khaled rushed forward, pressing his body right up against hers and forcefully kissed her. Reacting on instinct, Émilie used what energy she had left after days of beatings to lift her knee right into Khaled’s groin. He immediately stumbled backwards. He was clearly in pain, but as he looked up she saw uncontrolled anger blazing in his eyes and that scared her more than anything else.

Grabbing Émilie by the throat, he untied the rope that held her bound wrists to the tent post and then threw her to the ground. As she landed face down, all of the breath in Émilie’s lungs was forced out and she struggled to breath for a moment. Khaled chose that moment to act and soon his full weight was pressing down on her body, preventing her from moving as his hands began to tighten around her throat from behind, beginning to throttle her. Realising that he now intended to kill her, she desperately tried to struggle but she was incapable of movement and Khaled’s hands kept squeezing her throat.

A few moments later she was beginning to feel woozy and her vision began to dim. Just before she lost consciousness however, Khaled’s weight was suddenly lifted off of her and there was a strangled cry. Slowly turning her head, almost afraid of what she might see, Émilie looked to see Khaled’s dead body several feet away and standing over it was the last person she ever expected to see.

David had made his way through the camp slowly. He didn’t know which tent Émilie was being held in exactly so he took the time to look out for any clues that might give him the location. As he crept through the camp, his senses were on maximum alert. He knew that if he was discovered then Émilie might be killed before he could get to her, so he moved slowly, keeping to the shadows the entire time and keeping away from any tents with light coming from them.

After five minutes moving through the camp, taking a long circuitous route and never going in a straight line, he finally found the tent he was looking for. There was still light coming from it and there were two men keeping guard outside, AK’s slung across their chests. There was only one person they could be guarding.

Slowly moving forwards, David slung his AKM across his back and drew his Browning. Before leaving the hotel he’d attached the silencer and while it wouldn’t entirely mask the sound of the gunshot, it would reduce the chances of alerting anyone. Raising the pistol, he placed the two guards firmly in his sights. They were a maximum of six metres away, which for him that was point blank range and there was no danger of him missing. From his position hidden in the shadows of the camp, he quickly checked around but couldn’t see any of the other terrorists around and decided to take the risk.

The shots were quieter because of the silencer, and yet they still sounded too loud to David when contrasted with the silence of the camp. He was terrified that someone would hear the shots, or the men collapsing, but after a couple of minutes of waiting to see if anyone else appeared he breathed a sigh of relief. He’d gotten away with it. Swiftly moving out of the shadows, he grabbed both bodies and dragged them into the tent by their rifle straps. Then he turned to see Émilie lying on the ground, struggling feebly with a man lying on top of her, his hands on her throat. Unsheathing a combat knife Elliott had brought for him as a gift, he had a penchant for bladed weapons, he moved forwards and grabbed the man around the neck.

Dragging the man off Émilie, David kept his arm tight around the man’s neck to prevent him crying for help while the hand with the knife thrust the steel blade deep into the man’s back. He thrust again and again until he felt the man go limp and then let the body fall to the floor. Then David heard a sob behind him and turned to see Émilie staring sat him in disbelief with tears in her eyes.

Walking forwards he crouched next to her and put his arms around her, giving her the comfort she obviously needed, in spite of the danger of the situation. As he did so, he whispered to her, doing the best to comfort her and said, “It’s alright. I’m here now, you're safe now. It’s over now, you’re going home.”

“I didn’t think you were coming for me,” she sobbed, “I’d given up hope and then everyone else was killed and I was alone.” As she said this, Émilie began to silently weep, burying her face in David’s shoulder as he did his best to comfort the tortured young woman. But then the peaceful night was shattered by a burst of gunfire and David knew someone in his team had been spotted. Seconds later the entire camp erupted into a scene of devastation, noise and gunfire as the terrorists woke up to repel the intruders and David’s team fought back with equal determination.

Suddenly there were footsteps outside and the tent flap was wrenched open as a young man with an AK burst in spraying bullets over David and Émilie’s head as he did so. That first burst showed the man inexperience, firing too high and allowing the recoil of the rifle to dictate his aim. Reacting by instinct, David didn’t even think of reaching for his AK, it would take too long to bring to bear. Instead he drew his Browning from the shoulder holster and fired twice in the direction of the man. The first round hit him in the shoulder causing him to cry out and drop his rifle. The second round struck the man dead in the chest and he fell to the ground. David then fired a third round into the man’s head to make sure he was dead.

Turning his attention back to Émilie, David saw she was shivering with fear and he didn’t blame her. So, against his professional judgement, he didn’t pick her up and rush her out of the tent. Instead he just stayed there, crouched with his arms wrapped around her, doing his best to calm her before they left. Meanwhile outside the sounds of battle were continuing and getting closer as David’s team moved through the camp, eliminating any terrorists that attempted to stand in their path.

David’s decision to ignore his professional judgement proved to be a mistake as minutes after choosing to remain in the tent until Émilie had composed herself, the flap was thrust open again and the Commander walked in. Neither David nor Émilie immediately noticed the man’s entrance and it was only when he cocked his Colt Anaconda with a loud metallic click, that David became aware of the danger he and Émilie were in.

Moving quickly he pushed Émilie flat to the ground as he swept his left hand in a wide arc that forced the Commander’s weapon to the side even as it discharged loudly, even against the sounds of battle from outside. Despite partially deaf and stunned from the gunshot, David’s tried to bring up his Browning in his right hand, but before he could fire the Commander had closed the distance. David’s pistol was forced wide of his target and then the Commander dived onto him, sending them both to the ground.

Grabbing David by his combat jacket, the Commander began to batter him in a frenzied flurry of blows. David tried to ride the blows as much as possible but his arms were pinned to his side and he couldn’t do much to avoid them, only deflect most of the force to the side. Suddenly thought a small figure threw itself at the Commander, rolling him off David and hitting him with small fists driven forwards with pure fury. For a moment David was too dazed to do anything but then a cry from next to him brought him back to his senses and he looked up to see the Commander holding Émilie by the throat, choking her.

Getting up, he charged towards the Commander and rugby tackled him to the ground, forcing him to release Émilie who also fell to the ground choking. The impact didn’t affect him much and it wasn’t long before the Commander was back on his feet and went on the attack throwing wild punches left and right. However David had used the moment to recover and now brought his experience and training to bear, effortlessly avoiding and blocking the blows before sending back a few of his own. The Commander was a good fighter and he’d obviously led a tough life, but he wasn’t a trained soldier and that showed as David quickly found openings to land blows on the enemy.

First he slammed his foot into the Commander’s knee, and then, before the other man could fall, he sent a knee into the man’s groin. This had the Commander on the ground instantaneously and David followed up with a heel to the solar plexus which winded the man. Incapacitated the Commander could only then watch as David retrieved his Browning and pointed it at the man’s head.

For a moment David found he couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger. Then he remembered the French agents who’d been executed and all of his inhibitions fell away as he pulled the trigger and watched the bullet slam into the Commander’s head, killing him instantly.

Even as he then moved to pick Émilie up, there was more movement at the tent flap as two more terrorists wielding AKs burst in. Without thinking David threw himself over her, trusting his body armour to protect any hits that came close. Sure enough there were two impacts in his back that felt like a horse kicking him, following by cursing as the men ran out of ammunition and began to reload. Rolling onto his bruised back his hand with the Browning rose and he fired four times, two double taps that hit the men in their chests and dropped them with barely a sound.

Deciding the tent was too exposed they needed to move; David handed her the Browning and picked up his AK. As he did this, he told her what he wanted her to do. “Okay Émilie, you need to take this and watch my back okay?” he said as she took the pistol, “we’re going to move out of the camp now. I’ll take the lead with the AK, you make sure no one blindsides us from behind. Clear?”

She nodded and cocked the Browning’s hammer back as David raised the AKM and lifted the tent flap, stepping out into the desert night and the battle that was still ongoing. The two of them moved quickly, weapons raised and prepared for anything as they passed through the rows of tents. Suddenly up ahead he saw four men carrying rifles tumble out of a tent.

Lifting his AK, David sighted up the group of men and fired a long burst in their direction, half emptying his magazine in a few short seconds. Two of the men instantly fell to the ground with their cries muffled by the loud sounds of the rifle and another stumbled into the darkness clutching his arm.

The fourth man wasn’t harmed and raised his own rifle, firing several short bursts in David’s direction, who then felt the bullet pass over his shoulder. David then fired his AK again, this time switching to semi automatic, firing two rounds that struck the man in his chest and sent him to the ground. Moving forward, the pair continued making their way out of the camp; they hadn’t gone another ten metres however when she suddenly fired two rounds, killing the man who David had wounded in the arm.

It was then that David noticed the gunfire in the other parts of the camp had subsided and he got onto the radio to find out what was happening. “Elliott, come in,” he said.

“We’re here David, what’s up?” the reply came, crackling through the static.

Glad that the team was alright, David answered, “What’s going on at your location?”

“Resistance has vanished,” Elliott replied, “I think we’ve either got them all or else they’ve run off. We’re at the motor pool and we’ve found a couple of nice vehicles here. I’ve sent Duncan to collect our Land Rover. I think we’ll liberate one of these cars as well though. I’m also sending Ryan and Harry off to lay charges around the camp. Then we can get the hell out of here and back to Cairo, drop off the French agent. Then we can head off towards the Libyan camp and deal with that.”

“Okay, We’ll be with you in a couple of minutes, stay prepared just in case they try an ambush.” As he put the radio away, David turned round and with Émilie in tow headed back into the camp. He remembered seeing the motor pool on the North Western edge of the camp.

As they moved through the camp, Émilie asked, “What was that about going back to Cairo and dropping me off there?”

David looked at her; initially he was wondering why she’d suddenly asked the question. When he saw the old determination and fire in Émilie’s eyes he knew exactly why she was asking. Smiling at her, he said, “Your superiors want you back in Paris and debriefed as soon as possible. They’ll also want to tutor you in how to deal with the press, who’ll certainly want to talk to you.”

“What if I were to ask to come with you and hit the Libyan camp?” she asked in reply, “would you let me come with you?” He sighed deeply as he heard this. As soon as he’d seen her expression he’d known she’d be asking to come with him and now he was in two minds about letting her come.

On one hand he didn’t want to put her in such a terrible situation after the experiences she’d had over the last couple of days. But on the other hand she could provide an extra gun on the ground and it would also allow the team to strike the next camp immediately. That would prevent the Libyans getting wind of the attack and preparing themselves before the team could get there.

Eventually he made a decision. “You can come with us. But you do whatever I say even if that’s to wait for me and the team to do the job and come back. Okay?”

Émilie just nodded and not long after they arrived at the motor pool where Elliott was standing very proudly next to his new toy. It was a Land Rover Wolf with the weapon kit, similar to the ones issued to the military. It was completely stripped out of the unnecessary attachments and armoured on the bottom and sides and on top there was a Browning M2 machine gun.

As he walked up, David said to him, “Elliott, do we have enough supplies to go straight after the Libyan camp?”

Elliott looked slightly surprised at this question but after thinking about it for a moment he said, “Probably if we also salvage some things from here. Why do you ask?” looking slightly perplexed as he did so.

“Émilie’s decided she’s coming with us,” David replied, “so rather than go back to Cairo, we’re going to drive to the Libyan camp now and hit them now. How long before we’re finished here?”

“A little longer if we’re going to start hunting around for extra supplies. I’ll get Ryan and Harry on it as they’re laying the charges,” was Elliott’s answer as he got onto the radio and gave his team their new instructions.

As he did so David and Émilie sat in the new Land Rover and rested after the tension of the night. While they were there, David reclaimed his Browning off Émilie and replaced it in his shoulder holster. Then he picked up another AK from a dead terrorist and handed it to her. She took the rifle without a word and checked it over, with David watching from off to the side, trying to get an insight into her state of mind. He wanted to know that she would be able to cope with this before they left for the Libyan camp, if he didn’t think she was up for it then he’d be driving her back to Cairo in an instant.

He also couldn’t help but be wrapped up with his own mental torments. He never liked killing, in spite of the fact that he was exceptional at it, and having killed ten men that night he knew he wouldn’t be sleeping well for the next few weeks. He’d never been able to sleep well anyway, always able to be woken up by the slightest disturbance, but since working for the Department things had gotten a lot worse. He was now woken up by the faces of the men he killed. He just couldn’t help but remind himself of every single detail, and feel the guilt associated with robbing families of their fathers, brothers and sons.

Then he emerged from his reverie and remembered that Émilie was the one in need of help and attention. His problems could wait, he’d been struggling with them for years, that night wouldn’t make any difference, but for her everything had changed in a few short days and he wanted to make sure that she was able to hold up.

Chapter 36

It was an hour before the small six person team loaded up into the two cars and drove west, heading for the Libyan border and the second training camp. David and Émilie sat in the back of the Land Rover he'd brought from Cairo. She ended up asleep on his shoulder; who just sat there wondering just how much she’d been through in the last few days.

While Émilie slept, Ryan who was driving David’s car kept up a lively if quiet conversation between the two of them as the Land Rover sped across the desert. “So David, what’s so special about this girl?”

David laughed quietly at that, unsure of what had brought this question to the fore. Nonetheless he humoured Ryan, who was very laid back and had been a good friend to David at Hereford, always supporting him when David wanted to quit most. “I don’t know what you mean Ryan. There’s nothing special about her, but she is a friend and you know me, I never leave a friend behind.”

“Rubbish matey, I can see you’re attracted but I can also see you keeping yourself firmly in the friend zone. That leads me to ask what’s so special about this girl that you won’t let yourself get closer to her.”

David just shook his head, but seeing Ryan’s face in the rear view mirror he knew he’d have to give an answer sooner or later and unfortunately Ryan was astute enough to know when David was lying. “I promised myself early on that I wouldn’t get involved with someone in this line of work. I decided it would be safer and easier, plus I figured it would lead to fewer complications related to people questioning my loyalties, or hers.”

Ryan nodded in understanding, although he couldn’t help but ask the next obvious question. “So have you found anyone? I remember at Hereford you said you’d never had a relationship but since then you’ve grown up and now I wouldn’t wonder if you’re considered some kind of catch. So have you been fighting off the girls since going to university?”

David smiled and tapped his finger to the side of his nose but Ryan wouldn’t be distracted. “Come on man, there must be some gossip you can tell me.”

David finally gave in and told Ryan the truth. “Well there is one girl, nothing’s happened yet but I like her and I think she likes me, she wants to be a lawyer.”

“You want to be careful there, Lawyer’s are dangerous creatures. So is she pretty?” Ryan’s comment couldn’t help but cause David to laugh as he continued to talk.

“Yeah she is, very pretty but there’s something else about her as well. She’s smart, kind, determined and strong, she was in the Stock Exchange when things went belly up and she kept her cool throughout even when a lunatic held a gun to her head. So what do you reckon?”

Ryan smiled, it sounded to him like David was pretty serious about this girl and he was glad that his friend had found someone but Ryan felt he had to ask one last question. “So when are you going grow a pair and ask her out then?”

David shrugged in answer to this question. “I have no idea, I considered doing it before coming out here but I never got the chance and now I don’t know when I’ll be back. By the time I get back to England she could have a boyfriend.”

Ryan just laughed at that. “Mate if you never get the courage up to ask her out then you’ll never know how she really feels. What if she’s waiting for you to make the first move because she doesn’t know how you feel towards her and she doesn’t want to make herself look a fool? Tell you what, the instant you get back, go see her and tell her exactly how you feel, then see what happens and if she rejects you then call me and I’ll buy you a beer.”

“Well it’s a plan I suppose,” David answered although he refused to specify whether he would or wouldn’t do as Ryan suggested.

The two vehicle convoy drove on through the night, but as dawn broke Ryan began to yawn and David got on the radio and told Elliott in the other car to pull over for a short break and driver change. As soon as he said this, the car ahead began to slow down and Ryan followed suit until both cars were stationary side by side.

Getting out, David leant against the cool metal of the car as the other men also got out and unpacked some food and water from the boots of the Land Rovers. Deciding not to disturb Émilie, he joined Elliott and his other friends for a short meal composed of small packs of cereal. As they ate the men discussed their next objective. “Excuse me sir, but what can we expect at this other camp and why is the French chick still here rather than enroute back to Cairo?”

It was Duncan Macdonald who’d said this but David could see that the rest of the team were all wondering the same things and he decided that they deserved an answer. “The camp in Libya looked larger from the satellite images and better defended. From the images we could identify at least two machine gun emplacements and there are a minimum of forty men by our estimates. It’s going to be tough to take this camp out but with the extra firepower provided by the new Land Rover it will be possible. As for Émilie, her coming along means we can take out the Libyan camp before news of our attack in Egypt reaches them and they prepare or move, and having an extra shooter on hand reduces the odds against us. It’s not as if she can’t do the job, she’s good enough to watch my back and that’s all I need to know.”

As David lapsed into silence, his piece said, he saw that the men had all accepted what he’d said and he could see they trusted his judgement. If he said Émilie was good enough, or they could destroy the Libyan camp, then that was good enough for them and David began, for the first time, to feel the responsibility of command. These men looked to him to make the right decisions and at that moment he dearly hoped that he hadn’t made a mistake in going straight after the Libyan camp.

There was no more time for doubts however as the group had finished eating and after swapping drivers, the men got back into the two cars and continued their journey across the desert. Now behind the wheel, David stared ahead into the vast expanse of desert stretching in front of him while Ryan sat beside him riding shotgun and Émilie remained asleep across the backseat. As David drove he checked his GPS and saw that in the two hours and a half they’d driven over the night had carried the team a hundred and fifty miles towards their target but that still left them over six hundred miles from the camp in Libya.

That meant the convoy would have to push hard throughout the day and night to ensure they were in a position to attack the camp within two days, which David estimated was the time before anyone in the terror network realised the Egyptian camp was gone and warned the Libyan camp’s Commander. David hoped he’d find the leader of the terror group in the camp but he doubted it, he expected that there was another base for the terror group hidden far away with little to no evidence or intelligence related to its existence. That meant it would be a while yet before David could finish his mission but that didn’t matter to him too much, he would get the head of this group before long and when he did he’d finally be able to get justice for all of the men that the terror group had killed on their leader’s orders.

The two vehicles drove throughout almost the entire day and then the night, using driver changes to keep up the pace for the entire time and pausing for half the night to allow the men to get some sleep. By the second day of the journey the entire group was tired but the strategy had paid dividends. They were now only a couple of kilometres away from the camp, and it was time David decided to pull over and discuss the plan. So the two Land Rovers came to a halt and the entire team got out and crowded round the bonnet of David’s Land Rover where he’d already unrolled a satellite image of the camp.

“Okay here’s the camp and as you can see this is going to be harder than the camp in Egypt. We have confirmed the presence of two machine gun emplacements around the camp’s perimeter, but there could be more that are camouflaged. The camp itself is easily large enough to be occupied by sixty men although if we discount tents likely to be service ones then the actual figure is going to be closer to forty according to analysts.”

“The odds will be seriously against us then, what’s the plan?” As Harry asked this, David turned to Elliott who nodded. The two men then began to lay out the plan they’d devised that night while everyone else had been sleeping.

“David and Ryan will enter the camp on foot, coming in from the east. Their job is to cause general mayhem and then take out the machine guns. When they’ve done this, they will set up a position on the outskirts of the camp and draw the enemy to them. This done David will give me the signal and the other four of us will charge in, in the Land Rover with the machine gun. We’ll use the element of surprise and the extra firepower of the machine gun to take them out as quickly as possible.”

David then took up the reins of the conversation. “Our objective is to kill the terrorists in the camp, and to gather any intelligence we can, from whatever sources available to us. That means we will have to search any bodies for mobiles and so on, these may have GPS or messages that can help us. Also any computing equipment is to be retrieved intact if possible. Now if everyone’s happy with the plan mount up into the other Land Rover. Ryan and I will be taking this Land Rover to help us get into position.”

As nobody had any objections, the group split up. Émilie, Elliott, Duncan and Harry got into the Land Rover liberated from the Egyptian camp, with Duncan climbing up behind the machine gun and immediately checking it and prepping it for instant action. As he did this the other three checked their rifles before loading and cocking them, ready for action as soon as they were required. David and Ryan did the same next to their own Land Rover before David got in behind the wheel, Ryan rode shotgun and they moved off, keep the engine revs low to prevent the sound getting too loud and alerting the camp to their approach.

Chapter 37

An hour later and David and Ryan began their approach into the camp. It had taken them only ten minutes to get within striking distance of the camp but before making their move, David decided he and Ryan should observe the camp for a bit. This would give them the chance to better plan their attack and allow them to relay potentially crucial information to Elliott and the others about what they might be facing inside the camp. So for fifty minutes they lay on top of a dune, looking through binoculars as they garnered as much information as they could in that short amount of time.

The news the pair relayed back wasn’t brilliant in terms of their prospects. The camp easily had forty men inside and David could see most of them moving around, with rifles in hand. There were the two visible machine gun posts but David noticed that on a couple of the vehicles in what passed for the motor pool there were Land Rovers with similar machine guns to the one the rest of the team would be arriving in. That would massively increase the volume of fire brought to bear on David’s team so he decided they would have to be destroyed as well. Then it came time for him and Ryan to plan their plan of attack and execute it.

David decided, and Ryan agreed, that the easiest thing to do would be to hit the motor pool first, circling around the camp to do so. From there they could rush the two machine gun pits and destroy them before racing back through the camp to return to this sand dune. The dune they were on wasn’t too tall allowing the pair to make it up quickly enough to evade the gunfire of their pursuers, but it would be enough to allow David and Ryan to hold off the enemy until the cavalry could arrive. With the plan all set, David once again checked his AK while Ryan did the same with his G36C and then they cocked their weapons and set off towards the camp.

The first stage of the plan was achieved easily enough. There weren’t any sentries or a picket so David and Ryan found their approach easily enough and most of the men in the camp were involved in something somewhere so they found it a simple matter to skirt the edge of the camp and come up on the motor pool. There Ryan set some charges on the vehicles while David covered him with the AK and once Ryan was finished they began to make their way towards the machine guns. They were both placed to the north which represented the easiest avenue of approach and they were also manned which the pair had expected to be the case. What they didn’t anticipate was the fact that their approach came at the same time as the men manning the guns swapped over. So, just as David and Ryan came up on the first pit, the relieved crew came out.

For a moment the two sides just stared at each other, so surprised were they by the turn of events but then David and Ryan reacted and they did so quicker than their opposition. As their two opponents fumbled trying to bring their rifles to bear, David and Ryan rushed them at a dead run. David’s opponent went down with a knife thrust to the next, severing the jugular vein. Ryan opted to rugby tackle his enemy to the ground before rolling him over and then with a swift jerk snapping the man’s neck.

The threat of exposure dealt with silently, David and Ryan then split up. Ryan stayed near the machine gun they were next to while David made his way to the second gun. That way the two of them could simultaneously take out both machine guns before either of the crews could react. Fortunately the view the two crews had of each other was obscured by camouflaged netting placed over the net. It had been placed poorly which had led to the identification of the sites via satellite image, but they had been placed in such a way that the men at the two machine guns couldn’t see each other.

So David quickly made his way across the patch of open ground between the two guns, keeping his out for anyone that might raise the alarm, but the passage of ten or so metres was completed swiftly and silently without any threat of exposure. Once David was in position, he raised his hand to the throat mike he’d been given courtesy of Elliott to aid contact between team members. “Ryan, execute.”

That was all David needed to say and instantly Ryan burst into his machine gun nest and fired a rapid burst from his rifle that killed both men instantly. Ten metres away David had seen his friend enter the nest and did the same, his AK at the ready. The two men at the machine gun had no idea what was going on, even when Ryan fired they didn’t react. David, standing behind them, didn’t hesitate and fired twice, the rounds hitting both men in the head and killing them instantly. Both Ryan and David then placed a small plastic explosive charge on the machine guns before racing away as the timers began to count down. Meeting up on the fringe of the camp, David nodded to Ryan before leading the way right up the middle of the camp, heading for the dune where they’d make their stand.

As they two men went they fired their rifles at anything that moved, threw grenades into tents and caused general mayhem and devastation that soon had the camp in uproar and searching for their blood. Meanwhile the charges they’d set on the vehicles and machine guns exploded behind the two men, earning them a second’s respite as the enemy turned for a moment, caught by surprise, but soon the pursuit was back on. It wasn’t long before David and Ryan were racing towards the dune as gunfire from over thirty rifles kicked up the sand all around them. Fortunately the men firing at David and Ryan were inexperienced and while many of the rounds buzzed around them, none came close to hitting them and the two men were soon out of the camp and sprinting up the sand dune.

Having reached the top of the dune David and Ryan threw themselves down just behind the crest as rifle rounds struck the sand where they’d been just moments before. As the gunfire subsided David and Ryan rose to a crouch and saw the entire camp, nearly forty men, rushing towards them. Raising their rifles David and Ryan began to fire, knocking down several men before return fire drove them back behind the crest of the dune. As they crouched their David got on the radio to Elliott. “Elliott now would be a really good time for the cavalry to arrive.”

“We’re on our way, eta two minutes.”

With that Elliott got off the radio and David joined Ryan in sending several more rounds down the dune to the large mob of armed men trying to overrun them. Again David and Ryan succeeded in dropping several men before they were again driven back behind the dune. As they crouched there for a moment, David told Ryan what Elliott said, shouting to be heard above the sound of gunfire. “Two minutes Ryan, then the cavalry arrives.”

Ryan nodded and then the two men rose above the lip of the dune again and another volley from them drove several more men into the sand and had the rest of the group throwing themselves to the ground to avoid the hail of gunfire. Taking out a grenade, David pulled the pin before throwing it over the edge of the dune; he then patiently waited for a couple of seconds before rising again and firing a burst of fire at the still advancing group. Then David ducked back down behind the dune quickly, just as his grenade exploded at the foot of the dune killing several of the terrorists.

This pattern of David and Ryan rising above the dune to take down the front runners of their pursuers to slow their ascent of the dune, then ducking back down behind the dune, continued for a couple more minutes as they waited for Elliott to arrive. But the odds were against them and there were still more than thirty men making their way up the sand dune. Then a burst of machine gun fire was heart at the bottom of the hill and David and Ryan looked to see Elliott and the rest of the team arrive at full speed. Duncan was manning the machine gun, firing long bursts into the massed group of terrorists while Elliott and Harry fired from the passenger and back seats of the Land Rover and Émilie drove.

The sudden appearance of the rest of David’s team threw the mass of armed men into disarray. This was then furthered as David and Ryan added their own fire to that from the Land Rover, hitting the terrorists in their flank and disintegrating what cohesion they’d initially shown. Only a few minutes later and the terrorists broke, unable to cope with the volume of accurate fire that was cutting them down left, right and centre, they broke and ran. David and his team didn’t relent though and even those terrorists that tried to run were killed by the accurate fire of the SAS men who made sure that none of the men at the camp to be trained to commit terror acts survived.

Having destroyed the enemy, David and his team began the search from any scraps of intelligence that might lead them to either the Leader of the terror group being identified among the dead, or else his location. They took any mobile phones they found from the bodies of the dead and the tents and they also found a bank of three laptops in what looked like the command centre for the training camp. They also scavenged any fuel and water supplies that they could find to supplement what they had in the Land Rovers.

With that all done the next order was business was demolition and David and his team went from tent to tent laying charges to destroy the camp and wipe its existence from the face of the planet. The men were liberal in laying the explosives, they were using semtex from the terrorist’s own supply so it didn’t really matter and after a few minutes the entire camp was rigged to explode via remote detonator.

Having finished in the camp the six person team loaded back up into the two Land Rovers and headed back into the desert. When they were a couple of kilometres away however the two cars pulled over and David produced the detonator for the explosives and pressed the button, as everyone looked at the orange fireball that appeared over the top of the sand dunes. Then the cars set off again, heading back to Cairo several hundred miles away.

Chapter 38

The drive back to Cairo took three days; the team were in no hurry and took their time, not bothering to push themselves too hard. Once back in Cairo however they were back to work. The first job was to deliver Émilie to the French embassy where David and his team were lauded with praise for their achievement and thanks from the French government. Next David downloaded all of the information from the mobiles and laptops retrieved from the camp in Libya and sent it back to the analysts in the UK to see if they could pry any new intelligence form it all.

With this done David and the other men took some time off, getting a shower and a change of clothes before going downstairs to the restaurant and getting a full meal before having a couple of beers to relax. This took the men through to the evening and they then parted ways and went to bed, determined to get a full night’s sleep without a moving Land Rover beneath them.

The men followed this pattern for the next couple of days as they waited for news from London. They spent their day’s playing cards in David’s room, drinking at the bar and sleeping and eating but not much else. But then, three days after they got back to Cairo, David got a call from London.

Picking up the phone David heard Mary’s voice on the other end. “David, get your team together and get your stuff packed up, the analysts have come up with something.”

“What have you got for us Mary?”

“The analysts went over the information you sent over and they found intelligence that led them to a site in Afghanistan.”

“Hang on Mary, did you say Afghanistan?” As David asked this he couldn’t keep the surprise out of his voice. He couldn’t quite believe that he was now going to be sent to a warzone.

“Yeah David, the Director’s arranged a military transport to take you and the team out there. Your target is in the mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan so it’s pretty hairy out there. Because of this the Director’s arranged for some extra backup. Enough of that, your transport lands in an hour so you need to get moving, you’ll be given a full briefing when you land in Camp Bastion where you’ll be staying.”

“Okay Mary, we’ll be there. See you soon then.” With that David switched off and quickly got his team together before telling them what was going on and telling them to get their gear together ASAP. Then David went back to his own room and quickly threw his own stuff together before walking out of the room with two bags in his hands. The other four were also out quickly and the small group of five quickly made their way to their Land Rover in the garage, the extra Land Rover liberated from the Egyptian camp had been left in the desert, and it wasn’t long before the Land Rover was hurrying across Cairo and towards the small military airstrip that their transport would be leaving from.

The team arrived just in time and quickly boarded the transport, David taking the seat right at the back, next to the ramp. Then the ramp came up and the Hercules transport took off and was soon heading for Afghanistan and the end of David’s long mission tracking down and destroying the terror group that had declared war on him.

At that moment, Nathaniel was sitting in his last refuge in the world, a compound in Afghanistan. He sat in a safe room and wondered where everything went wrong. It was a question he’d been contemplating for several days now, ever since he realised that the training camps in Egypt and Libya had gone offline. It seemed likely that what intelligence had been there would have been collected by The Department and that would lead them to the compound where Nathaniel was now sitting.

So he sat and wondered how it had all gone wrong. He wondered what was so special about David Ryder that not even Nathaniel’s best could kill him. He considered whether he’d drawn too much attention to himself, first by taunting the intelligence services and then by declaring war on them.

He’d initially thought it would be an easy battle to win, no one had known he existed and he’d thought to use that and strike at the intelligence services from the shadows before they realised they were under attack. But time and again his main target, Ryder, had survived and he’d then become the hunter rather than the hunted. Now Nathaniel found himself in an unusual situation for him, he was on the back foot. He was disadvantaged compared to his enemy and now all he could do was wait to see what happened next.

Truth be told he knew he was in an impossible situation. Ryder had proved impossible to kill and yet an uncompromising killer. What men he had left were unlikely to be capable of stopping Ryder and the men he’d bring with him from completely thwarting all of Nathaniel’s plans. He knew there was nothing left for him to do but wait, and yet he’d been fighting for nearly two decades and he’d survived many situations. Some part of him still believed that he could still win; all he needed to do was take Ryder and his men off guard.

In the mean time there was still one last thing Nathaniel could do to ensure that if he couldn’t win the battle then he could at least take revenge. With this uppermost in his mind, Nathaniel picked up a phone and dialled a number before giving a set of curt instructions to the man who answered and then hanging up. Everything was now ready, now it was up to the enemy to make the next move.

Meanwhile David and his team were in the air, spending their time sleeping as best they could, resting up in preparation for the mission. When they were on the ground they didn’t know when they’d next get a chance to, if not sleep then be relaxed, so they took the opportunity on the flight. As the others did this however, David remained wide eyed and awake as thoughts of finally finishing the mission almost consumed him. When the terrorist group had effectively declared war on him, David had taken that as it was meant to be taken, personally, and he had made dismantling the entire organisation his top priority. Now that it was all nearly over an immense wave of relief and emotion was beginning to build up, threatening to overflow as soon as David’s task was finished and he could go home.

However there was still one last part of the terrorist group remaining intact and David believed it would be over when this last base of operations was destroyed, the leadership killed and the men scattered or killed. So while he dreamed of being free of the threat of attack, David’s mind remained firmly fixed on the task at hand and he didn’t lose focus of the fact that the plan he was on was just conducting him towards his next target, emotion could come when the job was done.

The Hercules had the team at Camp Bastion within four hours and it wasn’t long before the five men were disembarking from C130 and stepping out into the heat of Afghanistan as all around them soldiers hurried around, going about their business. On the flight then team had changed into desert fatigues and they quickly blended in with the other troops moving around the camp. For a moment the five men waited, they’d been told they’d be met by part of the team who’d be providing their support for the mission and sure enough they’d only been there for a couple of minutes when a man walked up to them.

“Agent Ryder?” the man asked Elliott, holding out his hand.

“That’s me,” David replied, before Elliott could, holding out his own hand to the man who couldn’t completely hide his surprise at David’s youth.

“Good to have you here sir, I’m Sergeant Paddy Rice, my patrol and another from my troop has been tasked with helping you with your mission.”

“I’m glad to have your help Sergeant. How many men do you have with you?”

“We’re full strength Agent Ryder, four men in each patrol so eight men in addition to the four you already have. The men are already several months into their tour so they’re experienced and ready to go.”

“Excellent Sergeant, shall we go then and we can all get fully briefed on the mission?”

“That’s what I’m here for sir, just follow me.”

With that Sergeant Rice led the way through the camp, pointing out some important aspects as he went but Elliott and his men had already visited Bastion several times and David had more important things on his mind. A couple of minutes later and David was led into a small hut where the rest of his team had already been assembled.

There were eight men standing around a large table that had maps and satellite images strewn across it. Walking in behind Rice, David detected the same surprise from the men at his youth but he ignored it as Elliott and his men followed on behind. There was a quick round of introductions, after which the men sat down in chairs surrounding the edges of the hut and waited for the briefing to begin.

They didn’t have to wait long as a couple of minutes after David arrived and a familiar face appeared through the door. “Alright David, how’s life treating you?”

“Not too bad Jack, couple of run ins with some terrorists, but I managed okay.”

As David and Jack Stirling joked for a moment, to the surprise of the other men in the room, Elliott cleared his throat to keep David on track. “So you’ll be briefing us will you Jack?”

“That’s right, and I’m afraid, David, that it’s an absolute beats that you’re going up against. The analysts found a location for this base and we’ve put satellites over it, done drone fly bys and so on. From what we can see it’s a large compound, with a solid wall at least three feet thick and several internal buildings which also appear to be very sturdy. From surveillance we’ve already identified at least twenty men inside the compound but it could easily hold three times that. In addition to the strike team which you see here there will be a large detachment from the Paras ready to intervene if the numbers prove too much.”

“How are we infiltrating?” David asked, cutting Jack off mid flow.

“A ground level approach has been judged too risky so we’ve opted for an attack involving three Eurocopter Dauphins. Each Dauphin will deploy a single troop, for air support you’ll have Apache gunships chalked to you if it becomes necessary. The three troops will be dropped onto different buildings that surround what we believe to be the command post of the compound. You’ll clear the building you’re dropped on, and then move through the rest of the camp. Captain Wilcox’s troop will move with Agent Ryder and take the command building while Sergeant Rice’s troop will move to the gate here and hold it to provide an exit and Sergeant Swain will lead his troop a knock out the motor pool located here.”

As Jack outlined the plan he gestured to various sites in the compound on the maps and satellite images. As he talked David looked carefully at the plan of the compound and saw that there was no landing zone for a helicopter and so he asked Jack a question everyone was thinking. “Jack, I don’t see an LZ for the choppers, what’s the plan to exfil”

“That’s one of the tricky parts. Not only will you be outnumbered in the compound but you then have to make your way a kilometre through the mountains. We’ve identified a flat plateau large enough for a Chinook so that’s where you’ll be picked up. It’s not ideal but it’s the best we’ve been able to come up with.” Nodding his understanding David redirected his focus back to the map table as he took in every aspect of the compound. Everything might depend on speed and he needed to know how to navigate his way through the compound without paying attention which might need to be focusing on other things like gunfire.

Then David’s attention was returned to Jack as James Swain asked him about the mission. “Agent Stirling, what time will our approach be occurring at?”

“It’s been decided to launch the assault at dawn. The hope is that the opposition will be taken by surprise and if you move quickly enough then you might be able to neutralise the enemy before they have an opportunity to mount effective resistance. That means you’ve got roughly twelve hours before the Panthers will be taking off. I’ll leave you to prepare yourselves as you see fit.”

With that Jack left the hut and the team of twelve men who only a few hours later would be in the thick of it. During the coming battle almost every aspect of the plan had to be changed and all of the men would be pushed to their limits, David more than the rest. But no one of the team could tell the future and they prepared themselves as much as they could considering the rushed nature of the intelligence and their inability to practice on a mock up of the compound which the SAS would normally be able to do. After another couple of hours studying the table maps, the men left the hut and began to prepare their weapons.

David still had his Browning having brought it from Egypt, but he found himself a thigh holster to replace the shoulder one he had, but he’d left his AK in Cairo and David’s main task was to find himself another rifle. He soon found a Heckler and Koch 416, effectively an M4A1 re-mastered by H and K that David found to his liking after firing a few rounds off down range. Their weaponry sorted, David and the rest of the team met up and had a meal in the canteen before then getting a couple of hours sleep before boarding the Dauphin helicopters, which they did roughly three hours before dawn so they were launching their attack just as dawn broke.

Chapter 39

As the three Dauphin helicopters sped towards the Pakistan border, the thirteen men in board did a final weapons check, before settling down for the flight. Some of the men slept while they could, others kept going through a check list, and making sure they had everything they might need. David however sat silently next to the door and thought about the mission. He imagined how it might feel to have this mission finally completed, to be able to go home without the threat of attack hanging over him. He also wondered what it would be like to finally get back to university and see everyone again, especially Amanda, seeing her again would be the best thing about this mission being over. These thought’s kept his mind occupied right up to the moment when he heard the pilot over the radio. “Get ready guys, we’re twenty minutes out.”

This had everyone reaching for their rifles and checking them once again as the Panthers began their final approach on the compound. That final part of the journey didn’t feel like twenty minutes, in fact it only felt like five minutes before the pilot sent another message over the radio. “We’re nearly there, open the doors and get the ropes ready. I don’t want to be stationary for any longer than I need to be.”

Having said this, David nodded to Elliott across the other side of the aircraft and they both got up and dragged the doors on either side of the chopper open. They then hooked up the two ropes that would let the team fast rope down to the roof of their initial target building. Below them the two men could see the mountains of the border region passing below them, and they nodded to each other as they readied their weapons and prepared themselves for the mission. Only moments later they saw the compound underneath them, dust swirling from the helicopters rotors. It was then that the mission began to go wrong.

The assault was scheduled for dawn because it had been thought that the large majority of the enemy within the compound would be asleep. As the choppers came to a halt above the compound however, the one carrying Sergeant Rice’s patrol began to come under fire and it became clear that the entire camp was mobilising to repel the Special Forces team. In reaction to the fire it was sustaining, Rice’s helicopter moved, and the men on board were forced to disembark between the building they’d been supposed to target and the wall of the compound.

Seeing the mission begin to fall apart, David quickly began to give orders over the radio to both Rice and Swain’s troops. “Swain, get your chopper to drop you next to Rice’s team. Then have both troops move up and take the three initial target buildings. Meanwhile Captain Wilcox and I will directly assault the main command building and take out the prime target before joining you to complete taking the compound.”

As Rice and Swain answered with affirmatives, David’s chopper moved to bring them into position above the command building. Throwing the ropes out of the sides of the helicopter, David and Elliott were the first two out, roping straight down to the roof of the building where they watched the roof entry door and the rest of the team leapt out of the helicopter and joined them on the roof. Its passengers now gone, the Dauphin moved off, heading back to base now its job was done. Meanwhile on the ground David’s job was just beginning and things were continuing to go wrong.

As his team entered the command building, weapons at the ready for anything that might come at them. Inside David was glad he’d gotten an alternative for his AK, the corridors were very narrow and the HK416 was only just short enough to be easily manoeuvred in the corridors. There was little resistance on the top floor, but one floor down the team were halfway along when they suddenly came under fire from both ends and at that moment David’s radio screamed into life. “Ryder, we’re coming under heavy fire and we need support. We’ve already taken casualties and we’re currently pinned down in the building Charlie team was meant to hit.”

Even as he heard this, David found himself unable to reply as he fired at the terrorists firing at him and Elliott from one end of the corridor. Firing a burst, his rounds dropped one of the men while Elliott’s own fire took out the other. Meanwhile at the other end of the corridor, the rest of his team had neutralised the other gunmen.

Turning to the team, he gave his orders. “Right, Duncan, Ryan and Harry, you’ll go and support the other teams. They’re pinned down in Charlie team’s target building, help them out and do what you can. Elliott and I will continue clearing this house and find the priority target, take him out and then we’ll join you at Charlie Team’s building and sort this mess out.”

With that the other three men headed back to the staircase and rushed off to join their pinned down comrades while Elliott and David finished clearing the level before moving down to finish clearing the four floor building. They met sporadic resistance on each floor, but could find no indication of a command room or anyone who appeared to be in charge of the compound. However when they reached the ground floor they caught a lucky break and found a concealed staircase leading to a basement, and when the two men arrived at the bottom of the stairs they found themselves facing a substantial steel door.

Setting up explosives to blow the door open, David and Elliott, hoped that they were right and their target was in fact on the other side of this door. But then there wasn’t any more time for doubt, the explosives were primed and David and Elliott hurried back up the stairs to escape the blast. Holding the detonator, David nodded to Elliott who would be first through the door, when Elliott nodded back David pressed the button and instantly there was a loud explosion followed by a gout of flame coming up the stairs.

Wasting no time Elliott then hurried down the stairs, his rifle at the ready and instantly he saw two men emerge from the room coughing, rifles held at their sides. Elliott wasted no time and fired a single burst of fire that killed both men and opened the way for him to rush into the room. As he ran in however there was a hail of fire that met Elliott at the door. His body armour took most of the hits. But he still ended up being wounded in three places as rounds struck him in the shoulder, arm leg, all of which were un-armoured.

As Elliott collapsed to one side of the doorway inside the room, David came through the door way, his own rifle at the ready and he came in firing. There were six armed men within the room. David’s opening gambit killed two and as the others reacted he was able to shoot another leaving him only three men to fight. By this time however he had closed with the three men and rather than try to fire their rifles, the men instead tried to use them as clubs. David however was prepared for this and the first man that charged towards him was stabbed three times in the chest, the second had his knife buried in his throat which he’d thrown at the man and the third man was shot twice by the Browning sidearm he was carrying.

It was then that there was another shot from behind David and he turned, Browning at the ready, to see a seventh man, holding an AK74U, standing in the corner of the room. For a moment there was complete silence as the two men realised they were in a Mexican standoff, but as this realisation struck him, the man smiled and spoke to David. “Well, well, Agent Ryder, a pleasure to finally meet you, although you’ve caused me a lot of trouble over the last few weeks. I’m assuming it is you I have to thank for the destruction of the camps in Egypt and Libya and the killing of my men there.”

“My pleasure and I’m assuming you’re the man that pronounced execution on me and planned the Stock Exchange attack.” As he said this, David sized his opponent up even as he calculated the chances of killing him before the AK74U could fire again. The first thing that David noticed was the rock steady grip Nathaniel had on the AK; there wasn’t even a hint of movement. That said Nathaniel was experienced in combat to some degree. But David wasn’t interested in that, he was confident that he was quicker on the draw than the other man, what held his gaze most was the utter hatred burning behind the man’s eyes. He hid it well but to David it was clear, this was a fanatic so burned up with hatred that he had no moral compass, no emotion and no conscience. He only had revenge.

As David sized him up, Nathaniel began to speak again. “One of the many things I’ve done. Perhaps I shouldn’t have left that taunt in that raided compound however. If I’d known how much trouble one nineteen year old agent could cause me I’d never have left that laptop there.”

“It was your first mistake, and your last. What happens now though? I have a gun, you have a gun and you have no idea how much I want to end this thing right now.” This comment from David had the man laughing hysterically and David couldn’t help but look confused. Seeing this, the man stopped laughing and explained what he found so funny.

“If you think this will end by killing me then you’re surely mistaken. In fact I’ve already taken steps to make sure that by the time you get home, you will feel the full force of my revenge. So shoot me now if you like but you cannot stop us from destroying your life piece by piece, starting with what you hold most sacred which will be your personal life rather than your life at The Department.”

These words confused David, they didn’t seem to make any sense to him, how could the man know what constituted his personal life. But then David smiled and just shrugged before speaking again. “Well whoever you’ve sent, I can deal with them and as for you; I think you provided the perfect solution for me.”

Just as the man realised what David meant by that, David fired and the round from his Browning hit the man directly between the eyes and sent him tumbling to the ground, the AK74U falling to the ground without firing another round. Then David turned to Elliott who’d manoeuvred himself into a sitting position against the wall.

“Can you get up Elliott?”

As David asked this, Elliott tried to get to his feet but his wounded leg seemed to be incapable of supporting his weight, so David did the only thing he could. First he slung his HK rifle across his chest, the David slung Elliott’s rifle across the other man’s chest. This done, David then hoisted Elliott over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift and began to carry him towards Charlie team’s building where the rest of the team was still pinned down and taking heavy fire.

As he went David held his rifle in one hand, ready for takeout any terrorist that got in his way, while he got on the radio requesting an update on the situation. “The situation is we’re getting our asses kicked. We’ve only got two men completely uninjured and three more are wounded but still able to fight. Everyone else is wounded too seriously to continue and we’ve got two serious casualties who need to get out of here soon or they’ll be dead.”

“Call in the Paras, and hold your position, I’m on my way with Elliott.” There was no further message following this, there didn’t need to be. Instead David moved as quickly as he could up the stairs and then to the front door of the building he was in. staring out of the open door, David could see Charlie building, and he could also see that it was being struck by fire from all sides, and there were men moving in on the building’s door at that very moment.

Deciding there was only one course of action open to him, David cocked his rifle before bursting out of the building and into the sun and sand outside. Rushing forwards, David fired his rifle off the hip in short, controlled bursts that scattered the men moving in on the front door of Charlie building, and killing four of the men. Despite driving away the men moving in, David was soon confronted with a new problem as the fire directed at the building was instead directed at him. Rounds picked at his feet and the ground all around him was alive with impacts from the gunfire that was missing him.

David didn’t stop moving however and he was soon at the door to the building, the air still alive with the buzzing of rounds, and then through the door and into the building. As he tumbled into the building, David found himself looking down the barrel of an M4 rifle held by Duncan who lowered the rifle and held out his hand. Taking it David got to his feet and looked at the sorry state that the Special Forces team was in. the two men who were uninjured were positioned at the front of the house, on the ground floor, the walking wounded were covering the door and providing cover from the second and top floor of the building. The seriously wounded men had been carried up to the back rooms of the second floor where they were out of the line of fire.

Even as David took stock of the situation, the building took an RPG hit that rocked the entire floor and when the dust subsided David saw Sergeant Rice, lying unconscious on the ground badly injured. Seizing the injured man David carried him upstairs while Duncan did the same for Elliott and while they were up there, it became clear that the RPG hit had injured more than Paddy Rice as David also found one of James Swain’s men also lying unconscious. Moving him into the room with the rest of the wounded David realised that there were four men still standing. He, James Swain, Duncan Macdonald and one of Paddy Rice’s men, but only himself and Swain were uninjured; Duncan had taken a round to his arm while Rice’s man had been injured in the side and the leg.

Deciding that holding the ground floor was now impossible, especially as the room Rice had been in now had a hole that the enemy could easily use to enter the house, David decided upon a change of position. He and Swain would hold the stairs which were narrow and twisted enough times to make them easily defensible, David would hold the first landing while Swain took a position at the very top. Duncan and Rice’s man would provide fire from the second floor, direct in the support Chinook and look after the wounded. It all sounded very promising but once again things went wrong as Swain took a round to his shoulder shattering his scapula and completely incapacitating him and David had to take him to the room with the wounded leaving only David to cover the stairs against the entire compound which from the volume of fire must number at least thirty men.

Taking his lonely position on the stairs, David readied his rifle and waited for the first enemy to appear. Instead of one however David soon came face to face with a massed group of six men, all carrying AKs all of which were quickly pointed right at David, even as he opened fire. Two of the men were killed instantly by David’s first burst while another three were wounded. But the sixth man managed to fire at David before he could adjust his aim. The first two rounds from the terrorists AK hit David straight in the chest driving him flat into the stairs and winded. The man then fired again and the next rounds hit David in the shoulder, the arm twice and the side. At that moment David managed to return fire and hit the terrorist in the chest, before David then reassumed his position on the stairs even as the next group of terrorists, brought rushing forward by the progress of their fellows, appeared around the corner of the stairs. As they approached they were reinforced by the wounded men from the first group, meaning David was now facing ten men.

This time David didn’t hesitate and second and fired a long burst that ripped through the packed group of terrorists and sent four of them to the ground before they even knew what had happened. Two more men were seriously wounded and another was lightly wounded and was dragged back by the surviving three men from this second group. Meanwhile the two men seriously wounded were left to bleed out and David took the opportunity to reload as his enemies reorganised themselves.

It wasn’t long before the terrorists were back, reinforced and with a plan of action. Rather than rush forwards, the men blind fired their AKs around the corner and soon David found himself covered in plaster from the walls and forcing him back around the corner. Before relocating completely David took a grenade and pulled the pin, waited five seconds and then threw it down the staircase. Four seconds after throwing the grenade David heard the explosion from his grenade and the screaming of the men wounded by the shrapnel.

Then David began to make his way up the stairs to the second floor and his last stand position. As he went David began to feel a little lightheaded and dizzy and realised that he was feeling the effects of blood loss, clearly his injuries might be worse than he originally thought, David reflected. As he struggled up the stairs there was a shot from behind and David felt the bullet slam into his side, right at the edge of his body armour, and embed itself deep in his abdomen. Spun round by the bullet’s impact, David fired a snapshot and hit the man who’d fired the shot in the head, killing the man instantly. Managing to make it to the top of the stairs, David crouched again and waited for the next assault.

It came soon enough and soon David was trading pot shots with a group of another five terrorists. After a few minutes David had managed to kill two of the men and wound a third. The last two however were careful, and not foolish enough to try and rush David’s position. Instead they got creative and threw a grenade up the stairs instead of coming themselves.

Fortunately for David, the grenade landed a stair below him and then began to fall back down towards the terrorists. But before it had gotten even a quarter of the way down the stairs, the grenade stopped. Realising he only had a few seconds; David abandoned his rifle and threw himself backwards. Slamming into the wall directly in front of the stairs hard, David drew his Browning and pointed to towards the staircase even as the grenade exploded and shrapnel shredded the position he’d just been.

Then it was just a waiting game, David kept his Browning trained on the staircase and just waited for the two remaining terrorists in the building to lose patience and try to finish the job. Deciding the best idea was to play dead, David closed his eyes and slumped, his posture making him appear to all intents and purposes dead and that was how he looked to the two men who arrived at the top of the stairs only a few moments later. Looking at them through his eyelashes, David waited for their attention to turn from him, at which point he’d have his best and only opportunity to kill them. That opportunity came moments later when then men turned ninety degrees and headed towards the rooms where Duncan and Rice’s man had been firing from, although it had been a couple of minutes since David had heard any fire from those rooms.

As the men turned however David made his move. Seizing his Browning, David fired at the closest man first and rather than fire one round he fired four to make sure he got the man. The first round hit the man in the leg, the second and third struck him in the chest and the last round hit the man in the neck. Then David swivelled his aim to the second man who had overcome his surprise and was traversing his AK in David’s direction. David however got there first and fired three rounds, one hitting the man in the shoulder and the other two hitting him in the chest, killing the second man and leaving David the last man standing.

It was then that David heard heavy gunfire from outside and the sound of helicopter rotors and knew the Paras had arrived. Using the last of his strength to reach his radio, David managed to send a message to the rescue team. “Rescue team, we are in Charlie building, everyone’s on the second floor, the wounded are in the back, I’m on the staircase and there should be two in the front rooms.”

At this moment however David’s strength failed him and he hands fell from the radio and he began to slip in and out of consciousness as blood loss from his injuries took its toll.

Chapter 40

David came to slowly. He felt groggy and disorientated and he couldn’t remember where he was. There was bright light everywhere and everything was painful. Then David felt the needle in his arm as he tried to move and he remembered everything. He remembered the assault on the compound, he remembered everything going wrong, then the memories ran out and all there were, were images. A man in fatigues standing over him, the doctors crowding around him, then there was nothing else.

As the memories ran out, David’s eye adjusted to the light and he began to take in more of his surroundings. He was in a hospital room, which explained why everything looked bright. Then as David’s eyes continued to adjust he saw that he wasn’t alone, there were several chairs in his room and all of them were occupied by sleeping figures. There was Mary in the chair closets to David’s bed, Jack was sitting next to the door, Katya was there as well, sitting near the window and Elliott was sat at the foot of the bed.

Suddenly the door to the room opened and a doctor walked in, carrying David’s charts and deep in her own thoughts. However as soon as the doctor looked up she gave out a cry of surprise as she saw David lying there, perfectly still but alert. At the doctor’s cry the room’s other occupants woke up and also noticed David was awake. Before any of David’s visitors could move however the doctor spoke. “Well Mr. Ryder, how are we feeling today?”

David laughed at that, his voice so weak that the laugh could barely be heard. “Like I’ve been shot about five times doctor, so not all that good on balance.”

The doctor smiled, before repeating her question, and David smiled in return before giving her the serious answer. “Well everything hurts for a start, but in particular my arm, shoulder and side are the worst bits probably because they took the bullets. Considering what happened though I’m feeling good though.”

“Considering the damage you sustained I think you should count yourself lucky you’re alive. You’ve been unconscious for three days, you nearly bled out several times and the bullet we took out of your side did some minor damage to some of your non vital organs. Then there was some light bone damage from the other rounds, you’re arm was fractured in a couple of places and your collarbone was clipped. All in all you’re very lucky but you’ll make a full recovery, all you need to do is give it time.”

David grimaced slightly at that. “How long doctor?”

The doctor shrugged before giving David the best answer she could. “It depends, considering you’re in peak physical fitness and factoring in your age and the fact that there was no major organ or skeletal damage, you could be out of here in ten days maybe. A full recovery will take a month or more and that’s if you take things easy, you did a lot of damage to yourself and it’ll take time before you’re up and about again.”

“In your opinion do you think I’ll be able to get back to university, we’re supposed to go back this week so I’m already going to be behind.”

The doctor thought for a moment before answering. “I think that should be alright, as long as at university you don’t do anything too strenuous.”

After that the doctor checked David’s vitals and the readouts from his machines before then leaving him to rest, and talk with his friends. Mary got things going and spoke first. “Good to have you back David; you had us all scared for a minute there.”

David smiled at that, it was good to be back and Mary jokingly berating him made him feel at home, and it was good to be home. “Well it seemed like a good idea at the time, hold the stairs, and keep the team alive. It didn’t quite go to plan though and so I ended up here.”

Elliott then stepped forward, his arm in a sling and walking with a limp. “I suppose I’d better thank you although the way people are talking you’re going to get plenty of thanks soon enough. You saved my life out there David and I won’t forget that.”

“What do you mean ‘the way people are talking I’ll get plenty of thanks soon enough?’”

David couldn’t help but ask, his curiosity piqued by the way Elliott had said it, with a mixture of surprise and awe in his voice. At the question though everyone in the room suddenly smiled, Elliott actually laughed. “News about what happened got out, the paratroopers started it. They found you at the top of the stairs still holding your Browning and guessed that it was you’d held the stairs. Duncan and Rice’s man corroborated that and then there was the video camera. Apparently there were CCTV cameras throughout the compound, inside and outside the buildings and pretty much everything you did was caught on the cameras. Well as soon as the politicians saw that footage they began to go crazy. There was talk of decorations this and medals that, eventually the talk turned to a VC, something they’re still discussing. The question is whether you can be awarded it because you’re not a member of the armed forces but my CO has come up with a solution to that which is part of the reason I’m here.”

With that Elliott walked towards David’s bedside and from inside his jacket he brought out a small cloth wrapped package. Opening it one handed because of the damage to his left arm, David saw that Elliott had given him the sandy beret of the SAS. “Welcome to the regiment David, and now I’m afraid I’ve got to go. I’ve got a meeting that I need to be at.”

With that Elliott hurried out as soon as his injured leg would allow, it was clear that whatever he had to be at was urgent. As he left, Katya stepped closer to David and gently took his left hand in both of hers. “So how’s my little English brother?”

“Not bad, how’s my older Russian sister?”

“I’m well; it seems we’ll have to put our plans on hold.” As Katya said this David summoned what strength he could and forced his left hand to grip hers, the movement wasn’t much but it was a comfort for the young woman who thought the world of David and hated to see him laid so low. As this moment passed between David and Katya, Mary spoke again, taking David’s right hand as she did so, mirroring what Katya had done.

“It looks like I’ll be looking after you again for a few weeks again. Unless of course you want to take up that duty, Katya, I’d be happy to give it to you.” As Mary said this she looked at Katya who smiled in return. While waiting by David’s bedside the two women had talked a lot and had grown close. They both saw themselves as David’s family which meant they were on the same side so the pair had talked for hours on end, learning far more from their conversations that either had learned from what David had said about the other.

Before any of them could say another word however the doctor came back in. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you all to leave. The patient has only just regained consciousness and needs his rest. You can come back tomorrow and visit again then.”

With that David’s visitors were hurried out of the room and he was left to go back to sleep, which he did not long afterwards.

Chapter 41

Ten days later and David was finally leaving hospital. His arm was in a cast, and a sling for his shoulder and he was very stiff when moving but he was well enough to be getting out of the hospital. He’d be spending a few days at home then he’d be going back to university where all his friends were already. All in all David was happy to be leaving but his time at the hospital had been pleasant enough, made so largely by the staff, who'd all been lovely throughout David’s stay.

However David’s time hadn’t been all that peaceful. Every day he’d been plagued by the feeling that somewhere along the line he’d left a loose end that would come back to haunt him and the leader of the terrorist group’s words about revenge troubled him.

Then David put his worries and doubts out of his mind. He was going home and that mission had finished when the entire terrorist group had been destroyed at the compound. Then David looked up as Mary came into the room, smiling as she did so. “Big day today, you’re going home. I left Katya at the house doing some general bits and pieces to help; of course you don’t have a lot of luggage to take back as most of it was left up there. Now if you’re ready, let’s be off shall we?”

With that Mary led the way and David followed on behind as they left the hospital and got into David’s Aston Martin which was waiting in the car park of the hospital. Getting in on the passenger side, David sat back as Mary drove him home.

During the journey Mary kept up a steady, slightly one sided, conversation with David. It was largely focusing on the topic of university; Mary wondered how David felt going back, was he looking forward to getting back to his degree and so on. It took an hour and a half for them to make it out of London and to David’s house where Katya was already waiting for them.

Getting out of the car, David looked up to see the front door open and Katya step out onto the top step, a broad smile on her face at seeing David up and moving finally. Stepping forward, David was almost knocked backwards as Katya suddenly leapt down the front stairs and threw her arms around David.

Putting his arms around Katya, David continued to make his way towards the house and eventually managed to get inside at which point he walked through to the living room and collapsed onto the sofa, already tired by the short walk. As he lay there, Mary brought him through a drink and Katya brought through a meal which David took great interest in as the hospital food had been good as far as hospital food went but not brilliant compared to what he was used to. Wolfing down the sandwich he’d been given, David then gestured for Mary and Katya to join him on the sofa and soon he was flanked on either side by the two young women who both put their arms around him. As the three of them sat, they chatted and it was Katya who brought up the subject of David’s award. “Has anything been decided about your award David?”

David just shrugged at this as he answered Katya. “I’ve got no idea, the last I heard they’d accepted me being named as a member of the SAS but they were still debating what to award me. Apparently some thought a VC was too much, others disagreed and so they’re still debating over it all. I daresay I’ll know in a couple of weeks what they’ve decided to do.”

Mary then entered the conversation. “So David, are you looking forward to getting back to your personal life and leaving The Department life behind you?”

As Mary said this David had a sudden epiphany as he suddenly understood the terrorist leader’s last words, he now knew what the man had been telling him and with a sudden and horrible realisation he knew where the terror group’s revenge would be targeted. Leaping to his feet, David moved as quickly as he could towards the phone, while both Katya and Mary watched with astonishment from the sofa.

David paid no heed however and picked up the phone before dialling a number from memory. He then had to wait for a few tense moments before he heard Elliott’s voice on the other end of the phone. “Captain Wilcox here, who is this?”

“Elliott, it’s David. Listen I need you to get a team together, the mission isn’t over, there’s one last loose end that needs to be dealt with.”

With that David explained exactly what he meant while Elliott listened patiently on the other end. As David finished speaking however Elliott spoke again and what he said constituted David’s worst nightmare come true. “David, put the news on.”

As David did so he couldn’t help but ask why, that question died on his lips however when he saw the headline, ‘University under siege.’

“When did this happen?”

“It started a couple of hours ago; there have been no demands and no communication so far. The police have control of the scene until such time as they hand over to us.”

“Cheers mate, I’m going to go now. I’ve got to get going.” As David said this he moved to hang up the phone but Elliott’s voice could just be heard urgently coming from the handset and David returned it to his ear to hear what his friend had to say.

“What are you doing David? Don’t do anything stupid now.”

David just laughed at that before giving Elliott the answer he had been afraid of most. “They’re my friends in there Elliott. You already know exactly what I’m going to do.”

“That’s what I was afraid of. Just be careful David, you might not be as lucky as you were in Afghanistan again.”

“See you soon Elliott.” As David switched off and replaced the phone on the hook, he turned to Mary and Katya who had overheard everything and were clearly wondering what on earth was going on, so David explained.

As he finished, it was Mary who reacted first and the reaction was exactly what David had expected. “No way, I’m not letting you leave just to get shot again. You can stay here and watch the police sort the situation out.”

“You know I can’t do that. The house that’s been taken over is mine, the people inside my friends; I can’t just sit here and wait for someone else to resolve this.”

It was then that Katya entered the conversation, although her position completely surprised both David and Mary. “You’d better come back alive. I won’t be happy if I find anymore of my holiday spent in a hospital. Now what do you need?”

David smiled at that, glad that Katya at least understood his position and why he had to go. Then he thought what he’d need before relaying the short list. “In a bag at the bottom of my wardrobe there should be some black tactical gear. Could you grab that for me while I sort out weaponry?”

Katya nodded and hurried away while Mary looked at David and resigned herself to the situation. “You’re really not going to be persuaded not to go are you?”

“Sorry Mary but you know I could never abandon my friends, especially when they need me most.” Then David left Mary there and made his way to the library on the ground floor. Inside he stopped in front of a stretch of seemingly innocent wall but when David placed his hand on the wood he found the hidden catch. Pressing the catch the wall suddenly moved inwards and then slid to the side to reveal a hidden staircase leading down into David’s personal armoury and firing range.

Walking down the staircase, David first went to the weapon racks and found a Browning which he took off and loaded before then grabbing a thigh holster to go with it. Then David crouched and search under the racks for a moment before finding what he was looking for. It was a bullet proof vest, but it was one of a kind.

It was constructed from a new form of carbon fibre produced by Cambridge university, although it wasn’t actually in the public domain, David had used his contacts to get the researchers to produce a sample for ballistic testing. It had performed excellently, better than Kevlar in some tests and David had then requested for the university to create a bullet proof vest for him. He’d been measured for it exactly and it was slim enough to fit under his clothes without being obvious, and it was exactly what David would need going up against the enemy in his current condition, as long as the enemy didn’t shoot him in the head.

Taking the Browning and bullet proof vest upstairs, David went back through to the living room where Katya was back with his bag of tactical clothing, into which David added the Browning and the vest. Then David picked up the bag in his right hand and made to leave in that moment, but before he could move Mary spoke. “Wait, let Katya drive you, I’ll get Jack and follow you two up. At least then I can get you official permission to be on scene and act as you see fit.”

Nodding David waited as Katya joined him in leaving while Mary hurried into the garage and soon rolled out in her own car, a Ford Mondeo left, with David and Katya soon following on behind in David’s Aston Martin. Having first programmed in the sat-nav for Katya and choosing the most direct route, David settled into the passenger seat and rested as best he could, while Katya guided the DB9 onto the motorway. Once they were on the motorway David said only one thing. “Don’t bother with speed limits Katya; gun it as fast as you dare. There shouldn’t be much traffic for a few hours yet.”

Katya didn’t respond but as David said this, the speedo jumped as she put her foot down and the engine responded. Satisfied that they were going as fast as possible, David turned the radio on, plugged his I-phone into the jack and began to play some music to relax and break the silence of the car. Next to David, Katya kept her eyes on the road and focused on driving as the miles already started to tumble away, checking the sat nav Katya saw that she had nearly two hundred and fifty miles to cover, which at current speeds would take just under three hours. Meanwhile in the passenger seat, David who was more drained than he realised from everything that had happened, had already fallen asleep as the Aston Martin continued to race along the motorway towards the last loose end he needed to tie off.

Chapter 42

Two and a half hours later and David woke up to find Katya nearing their destination. Looking at her, David could see she was absolutely exhausted and suddenly broke the silence of the car, causing Katya to cry out in surprise. “Katya, pull over and swap with me. I can see you’re exhausted and need a rest.”

Katya just shook her head and pointed to the sat nav which told them both that they were only ten miles away from the City. Sighing David realised Katya was right, there was no point stopping now for a driver change as they’d be there in less than ten minutes. Settling back in the passenger seat again, David looked out of the window and saw the mid afternoon sun casting ever lengthening shadows over the landscape. As David sat there, he wondered what was happening in his university accommodation, and how his friends were coping with the situation.

As David thought about his friends, they were thinking about him. His absence from their present situation was noticeable, made more so by the very up front attitude of their captors. They’d been told from the beginning everything was happening, and who David really was. At first none of them apart from Amanda had believed what they’d been told, but after Amanda had had a pistol pressed against her head, she’d quickly corroborated what the captors said. This left David’s friends to struggle with the fact that there was a whole other side to the man that they knew nothing about.

After they’d all come to terms with the shock of discovering the truth about David’s disappearances from university, which all of his friends had wondered about but none had openly questioned him about, David’s friends then experienced a new emotion. They began to feel hope, they knew how David regarded his friends as family, and they knew that he wouldn’t leave them there. He’d come to help however he could and from what the captors and Amanda had told them it seemed probable that David was capable of rescuing them from this situation.

These hopeful thoughts kept the young students’ minds distracted from the whole truth of the situation they found themselves in. the truth was though that they had no idea whether or when they’d be released, they’d been held captive at gunpoint for four hours already, nearly five and there was no sign of the terrorists getting ready to negotiate. Instead they wandered through the house, carrying their weapons casually but that didn’t stop them being exceptionally menacing to the captives. For the most part however their captors didn’t bother the students, although when they did it usually involved some menacing threat and a couple of kicks or punches to accentuate the point.

Amanda, who had already experienced something of the terror of a similar situation in the Stock Exchange, had managed to keep control throughout the four hours and had helped the others do the same. But in the Stock Exchange she’d had David to rely on and had relied on him heavily throughout that experience. He’d kept her calm and had reassured Amanda that things would be alright the entire time; it had been him making her believe that, that had helped Amanda through everything and this time he wasn’t here. Instead Amanda had to now do whatever she could to keep her friends as calm as possible and keep them believing that things would be alright, as she herself had believed over two months ago.

There were brief moments however when Amanda allowed herself to entertain slight doubts. Doubts as to whether everyone would escape from this situation, doubts as to whether David would be able to get them out and whether he would survive the attempt that she knew he would make regardless of the risks. But whenever these doubts did leap into her mind, she remorselessly beat them down. She couldn’t afford transmitting those doubts to the others as they might panic and then the entire situation might escalate to a point where Amanda could no longer even try to keep things under control.

At that very moment Amanda was being confronted with yet another challenge to make the situation she was in even harder. One of her friends was beginning to become increasingly depressed as they began to realise that they might not be leaving the house alive. So Amanda took it upon herself to try and keep the girl as calm as possible, and the duo talked in a corner of the room that the hostages were being kept in.

“Let’s not kid ourselves Amanda; we’re all going to die here aren’t we?” Rose’s tone was near hysterical although she at least had the presence of mind to keep the volume of her voice low as she said this. This meant that fortunately Amanda only had to deal with one case of hysteria and not fifteen or so.

“Of course not Rose, don’t be so negative, you’ll scare everyone. We’re going to be just fine, if these men haven’t hurt us yet then they’re not going to and David will be here soon. He’ll come and he’ll get us out of here. So don’t worry, we’re going to be alright.” As Amanda said this, she stared into Rose’s blue eyes, doing her best to convey the confidence that her words implied that David would in fact be coming. She also tried desperately to believe her own words, and for a moment she did.

But then one of her captors walked over, a machine pistol clutched in his hands and that belief crumbled as quickly as it had arrived. The man stood over the three captives for a moment, clearly enjoying the power he held over them, then he spoke for the first time. “I wouldn’t hold out much hope for a rescue. Your boy might come here but from our information he can’t win. He was shot only a couple of weeks ago in Afghanistan, four times from what I heard. If he comes then we’ll be waiting for him and he won’t be coming off best in this confrontation.”

As Amanda heard this, she could feel the cold hand of fear clutch at her heart, and she refused to look at the man, who continued walking around the room, as she struggled to cope with the revelation. David was injured, he was outnumbered and he’d almost certainly be outgunned, with all the odds against him how could he possibly win, and if he couldn’t win then, how could she, or anyone else, begin to hope to get out of this situation unharmed. But once again Amanda forced these thought’s to the back of her mind, she had to believe in David, she had to or else she had to accept that there was no hope for her or her friends.

Meanwhile in the Aston Martin, David and Katya were just entering the city, to find that the roads were all locked down and the traffic stationary. David just sighed before turning to Katya. “Looks like we’re walking from here then; come on; we’d better get moving so we can be on scene as soon as possible.”

As David said this he climbed out of the car, reached into the back to grab the bag with his tactical equipment and then set off. As he slowly walked along the cobbled streets, Katya locked the car and hurried after him, catching up with David after only a few seconds. As they walked Katya kept up a conversation between the two of them, trying desperately to keep David’s mind off what was going on. “I can see why you like it here David, this city looks like a nice place to live.”

David laughed, the sounding coming out a harsh bark as he did so and there was no mirth there. “It is a nice place to live but you should see it without this kind of situation hanging over us. Then it’s something else.”

At that point however David was brought to a halt by a roadblock set up and manned by several police officers who were preventing the movement of the sizable crowd who had gathered there and were preventing David and Katya from continuing along the road. For a moment David stayed stock still; but when he realised that the crowd wasn’t going to be moved on by the police, he surged forward and began to force his way, forcefully and unapologetically through the crowd until the only barrier to his forward motion was the police barrier itself.

Stopped by the PCs at the barrier, David struggled to produce his ID considering his injured arm, but he eventually did so and brandished it at the closest constable. As the constable took the wallet and examined the ID David had produced carefully, David waited, his impatience growing until Katya placed her hand on his uninjured shoulder and squeezed it, telling him to calm down and get control of himself. Realising that his current attitude wasn’t going to help his friends, David took a deep breath and spent a few moments regaining control over his emotions which were currently in complete control of him.

By the time David had forced himself to calm down, the constable had come back and handed back David’s wallet before opening up a small gap in the barricade. As David stepped through the gap, followed by Katya, the constable turned to him and gave him some directions. “There’s a command post just across the road from the building which has been taken over. You’ll find the scene commander there and that should be your first port of call. I‘ve already radioed ahead to let him know you’re on your way.”

Nodding David said, “thanks mate, keep up the good work,” before continuing to follow the cobbled road towards the command post he’d been directed to which, from the sounds of things, was based in the back garden of the college offices. This time Katya didn’t try to engage David in conversation, she could see he had retreated too far into himself to care what she said, so instead Katya decided to leave David to his thoughts as he set a rapid pace along the street towards the command post.

Fortunately the walk wasn’t long and a couple of minutes after being passed through the barricade, David and Katya came within sight of the house where the situation was occurring. It was surrounded by police cars, ambulance and fire crews and armed police all watching the front of the building and behind this cordon of emergency service crews was the building where David had been told he’d find the officer in charge of the situation. However as David and Katya approached the milling crowd of emergency service personnel, they were suddenly confronted by a dozen of armed police carrying MP5’s and clearly viewing the two unannounced people walking down the street as potential threats.

Remaining cool, David calmly said, “I believe the enemy is inside the house over there, not here. Wouldn’t your attention be better focused behind you therefore?”

As he asked this, David tried to continue walking forwards but the armed police refused to budge and kept their weapons trained on both David and Katya. Then one of the men with a sergeant’s insignia stepped forward and began to interrogate David. “This is a secure area Sir and you cannot be here. I must ask you to turn around and go back the way you came otherwise I’ll be forced to detain you and send you to a holding cell for a few hours.”

Standing stock still, David didn’t turn around and for a few moments he and the sergeant stared at each other, neither speaking nor neither moving as they waited for the other to break first. Eventually the sergeant, faced with David’s cold gaze, broke and tried to use bravado instead. “Sir, this is your last warning, leave now or else I’ll have you arrested. You are interfering with a delicate situation here.”

It was then that David spoke to the sergeant and his jovial and carefree tone from before had been replaced by a cold, hard tone that told the sergeant and his men that they had no idea what David was capable of and who they were dealing with. “I heard you the first time. Now I’m going to give you a warning, let me pass or else I’ll have you disciplined for stopping me.”

The sergeant’s nerve faltered then but he knew he had to keep up the act for as long as possible and in a last throw of the dice he gave his men their orders. “Arrest them boys,” the sergeant said as he made a big show of aiming at David’s head with his MP5.

David remained calm however and produced his ID for the second time before handing it to the office brave enough to approach him first. The officer slung his MP5 behind him and took the wallet before checking the ID inside with as much care as the constable at the barricade. Meanwhile the rest of the armed officers remained stationary, waiting for their colleague’s verdict on the ID. That verdict came soon enough and the armed officer said, “Sarge? This guy’s got some kind of spook’s ID.”

The Sergeant thought for a moment before finally backing down and saying, “Very well, please make your way to the command post as quickly as possible, sir. I’m sure they’ll be expecting you having gotten a call from London not long ago.”

Nodding David made to leave after getting his wallet back from the armed officer, but before he went he said, “By the way Sergeant, well done. Remain vigilant won’t you and keep up the good work.”

With that David moved off, leaving the sergeant and his men slightly dumbfounded, although David never saw their slack jawed expressions at his praise. He’d already set his sights on the command post and was picking his way quickly and deftly through the crowd of emergency services on his way to visit the Scene Commander.

As all of this was happening inside the city, less than an hour behind David, Mary and Jack were racing north in a Department saloon and were rapidly catching up with David, being only thirty miles outside of the city. Sitting in the passenger seat, Mary couldn’t help but drunk her fingers on the door, and her nervousness seemed to be infectious as moments later Jack began to do the same on the steering wheel. Mary didn’t notice this how infectious her anxious mood was however as her mind was fixed on only one thing, or make that person. She was worried about David, more worried than she’d ever been. He’d only just gotten out of hospital after being shot multiple times and yet he was now throwing himself back in front of gunfire, so determined was he to help his friends.

Mary’s problem was that she couldn’t blame, or condemn David for what he was going because the loyalty he had for his friends was one of David’s best characteristics. It was one of the things that had first brought David to her attention and one of the reasons she loved him so much. The fact was that Mary hadn’t expected David to act any differently, but that in a way was the problem.

David felt so much loyalty towards his friends that he’d never accept something wasn’t within his own limits when it came to friends. Now David was rushing towards a fully armed group of terrorists, still recovering from his injuries courtesy of Afghanistan and Mary was terrified that this time David wouldn’t even be making it home on a stretcher, this time it would be in a pine wood box. But while Mary mulled these thoughts over in her mind, less than twenty miles away David was getting ready.

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It took another fifteen minutes for Mary and Jack to make it into the city, and from there it took them another ten minutes to navigate their way through the crowds and police cordons to finally arrive at the Command Post. In those twenty five minutes David had been busy making a stark impression on the Scene Commander and the rest of his staff.

“Gentlemen, I am Agent Ryder from The Department based in London and I want to know the latest about this situation.” The tone David had used was brusque and professional, the request a command and everyone in the Command Post at the time had turned to stare at him, taken by surprise at his sudden authoritative appearance.

Then the acting commander had stood up and held out his hand for David to shake as he provided the information David was asking for. “I’m Superintendant Wilson, and I’m in command here. The situation is quiet I’m afraid, we don’t know anything about the men inside or the captives they’re holding and we’re waiting on information about the building as well. In the meantime we’ve had no demands and no communication from inside, despite our attempts to establish links. For the moment we’re just waiting, and trying to keep the perimeter secure.”

David nodded, on the outside appearing calm while internally his mind was in flux. It seemed to make no sense for the hostage takers to make no attempt at communication; even if it wasn’t intended to get anywhere they’d normally establish some dialogue. Then David forced himself to return to the present and said to the Commander, “Well done, it’s clear you’ve done what you can. However I’m here because these men we suspect are the same men I’ve been hunting around the globe and I’ve been tasked with neutralising the threat they pose to our security.”

At this the Commander couldn’t help but stare at the sling David’s arm was in, and his thought was clear. “How can you stop them when you’re clearly not fully fit?” was the man’s obvious thought.

Smiling David answered the unvoiced question very simply. He grabbed the fabric of the sling and pulled it over his head with his right arm, then flexed and stretched his left one. Clearly trying to prove that he was perfectly capable of doing the job, and it worked as the men in the room were quick to accept the message David was sending. That was fortunate as David was screaming internally from the pain in his shoulder. It definitely wasn’t supposed to be out of the sling yet but he couldn’t very well do what he needed to with it in the sling. Then David spoke and as he did so the rest of the room listened up, already impressed with what they’d seen from the young man in front of them.

“I need your most experienced assault team in here on the double, I’m going to go and change into something more suitable. Then I’ll clue you in on both the building’s layout and a plan I came up with on the trip up here. After that we’ll wait for the hostage takers to open up talks with us. I have a feeling that now I’m here they’ll be far more receptive to your attempts.”

This said David left the room, taking his bag with him, and moved through to another room where he put his bag down and unpacked everything. The clothing was all fire resistant black tactical gear, then there was the Browning and his body armour and to top it all off a double edged combat knife. Stripping off the clothes he was wearing, David was reminded once again that he really wasn’t ready for this. His shoulder was wrapped in bandages, his lower left arm in a cast and his side was also bandaged. All in all David made a pretty uninspiring sight.

Even as these thoughts of self doubt began to push their way to the front of David’s mind, he began to get dressed. First he put on the black combat trousers, shortly followed by the bullet proof vest. It went on over David’s head with Velcro tabs then holding it in place and then over this David pulled a black T-shirt on. Looking at David you could see he was wearing body armour if you looked closely but at a glance he’d appear to have nothing on underneath his shirt, and with a jacket on the top of that it would be impossible to spot the vest. It was then time for David to pull his boots on and then a jacket which he zipped all the way up.

Now that David was dressed he set about putting on the rest of his equipment. David put on a webbing belt into which he attached several clips for the Browning and his radio and combat knife and then it was time for the Browning itself which David strapped to his thigh. His outfit now complete David made his way back through to the Command centre room to see a group of eight men all stood around the table waiting for him. The men were dressed in similar tactical gear to David, were carrying MP5’s and looked the part at least, although David was about to find out whether the team was as good as their equipment made them look.

Walking up to the table David looked at each of the men in turn before laying out the desperate and very risky plan that he’d come up with on the drive. He didn’t expect them to like it, he didn’t like it either, but it might work and it might be so unexpected as to give them the edge. “Okay gentlemen, let’s not waste time with introductions, there’s a lot of work to be done. The house has two doors one at the front and one at the back, and it has three floors inside. A single staircase connects the three floors and on each floor there are six or seven rooms. At present we don’t know where the hostages are being kept, how many captors there are or what we’re facing in terms of armaments.”

“Excuse me sir,” one of the men interjected, “but that’s a lot that we don’t know. Do we actually have any intelligence from inside the house that we can use to plan a proper assault?”

“As of yet no, but I’m expecting contact from the hostage takers soon. That will give me a chance to start on such a plan. In the meantime I have come up with two potential plans of action depending on the location of the hostages. If they’ve all be put in different rooms or spread out through the building then we will split up into three, three man teams all of which will clear a different floor of the house. We’d have to move quickly and overall that situation delays our ability to get to the hostages and increases the likelihood of losses. A far more likely and favourable situation is that all of the hostages are being kept in the same room. If this is the case we assault the room through the door, and take out the captors without hesitation. Once the captives are secured we then search the rest of the house for any remaining captors.”

As David finished going over the plan he could see he had been right. The men weren’t too happy with either of the plans, there were too many unknowns for them to be happy with it, but they were good enough to realise there weren’t many other options available to them. It was then that David outlined the last and most important part of the plan, and that had the other men liking it even less.

“Now to locate the hostages we need intelligence form inside the house and there’s the other problem of the front and back doors. Breaching through them will make noise and alert the hostage takers and there’ll almost certainly be guards who may also raise the alarm. To get around this I intend to enter the house myself, because I’m the ultimate target for these men they’ll probably let me in. once inside I’ll locate the hostages and neutralise any guards watching the front door, then open it allowing you men to enter the house with the element of surprise intact. From there it’ll be made easier for us to rescue the hostages.”

At this a voice from the door to the room behind David exclaimed, “That’s crazy David, what the hell are you thinking. If they let you in they’ll kill you for sure.”

Turning David saw Mary and Jack had arrived and had clearly heard him outlining the plan judging by Mary’s interruption. Turning David was about to tell Mary there was no other choice when suddenly the phone rang. Rushing over, David got there first and picked it up immediately. “Hello,” David said, “this is Agent Ryder. Who am I speaking to?”

“My name shouldn’t be important to you, it won’t mean anything. What should be important to you in particular Agent Ryder is that I am currently in control of over twenty students. Twenty young people you I believe you know very well indeed, and so now I think we should begin negotiating their return unharmed.”

David laughed at that, causing the man to say, “I assure you this is no laughing matter Agent Ryder. My men and I are perfectly ready to execute each and every hostage we have here.”

At this point David interrupted the man to explain his laughter. “I was laughing because you say you won’t to negotiate and I’m about to give you a gift.”

“And what kind of gift would that be?” the man’s tone clearly signalled to David his interest in what David was saying.

“I’ll give you me, unarmed and compliant. You get me and in return you’ll release the hostages.” At this David could hear protests from both Mary and Katya inside the room and from people on the other end of the phone. This distracted the man on the other end of the phone for a moment, leaving David hanging on tenterhooks for a moment as he waited for the man’s answer. Eventually though the protests from the hostages were quietened down and the man finally spoke again, giving the answer David was waiting for.

“You’ll have our answer presently, be sure not to try and take advantage of it however or else people will die.”

“There’ll be no action from us; you have my word on that.” As David said this the phone went dead and he replaced the handset and turned to the rest of the room. “We’ll have their answer in a few moments; keep an eye out for anything changing.”

In the end they had to wait three minutes before the hostage takers answer was seen. All of a sudden and without warning the front door opened, inviting David in. as soon as he saw it David knew that his deal had been agreed upon, and turned to Mary, Jack and Katya. “Don’t worry guys, if they couldn’t kill me in Afghanistan with thirty men on their side, what chance do they have now? I’ll be out in half an hour or so I expect, just keep an eye out.” Then David turned his back on his friends and strode across the street and straight in through the front door, already deciding that this was a very bad idea.

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As soon as he was in through the front door, the door closed behind David and he felt the muzzle of a gun pushed against his head while in front of him there were three hostage takers, two of them holding guns against the heads of two of David’s friends. Realising that acting now was foolish David cast aside the crazy idea that he could attack his friends’ captors as soon as he was in through the front door and raised his hands calmly.

Then the third hostage taker, the one not threatening one of David’s friends nodded to the Browning and said, “Lose it.”

David nodded, carefully withdrew the Browning with his thumb and forefinger, ejected the magazine and placed it on top of a nearby cabinet, then pulled the slide to prove the breach was empty and then placed the pistol next to its magazine. The hostage taker then nodded to the man behind David saying, “Frisk him make sure there are no surprises.”

Soon David felt a pair of hands roaming across his body, checking him for any other weapons and the hands soon found his combat knife and removed it and did the same to David’s radio. Now weapon less, with no form of communication with the police team outside, and injured David was completely at the mercy of the hostage takers who took full advantage of that fact. He was quickly taken up a floor to the largest room in the house where the hostages were being kept, and once there David found himself suspended between two strong arms that held him tightly.

It was then that the hostage taker who’d spoken to him downstairs began to take the group’s revenge for the death of their comrades. Starting with some hard blows to the body, which even with his body armour David felt, the man then moved on to cause some real pain, speaking as he did so.

“Now that was just a warm up for me, being trained by the SAS to cope with any kind of interrogation that won’t have done much to you, will it? But now let’s move onto the main attraction because from what we know you were injured in Afghanistan while killing our fellow warriors for god and our leader. The information we had said you were shot in the arm, shoulder and side so let’s see just how accurate that information was.”

With that the man’s hand shot out and rather that strike David in the body from the front it hooked round and slammed into David’s injured side. Gasping for air, winded and feeling intense stabs of white hot pain from his side David would have collapsed to the floor if the men holding him up hadn’t been there. As he struggled to get his breath back, David looked up at the man who’d hit him, only to suffer another crushing blow to his side. After that the tempo increased and soon the blows were slamming one after the other into David’s side over and over again.

Then all of a sudden the man stopped, and nodded at the two men who released David’s arms and allowed him to slump to the carpet, desperately trying to get his breath back and clutching at his injured side as he wheezed. He remained kneeling for several moments, but his tormenter wasn’t done yet and began to circle David, resuming his monologue as he did so.

“I imagine that you felt that, either that or you’re a bloody good actor. Now of course there’s the question of what to do to you next. There are the injuries to your arm but apparently they’re in plaster cast so we won’t make much of an impact there will we? But there is your shoulder, and that certainly isn’t protected with plaster.” Saying this, the man made his way back in front of David, and again without warning his hand shot out once again. This time the hand landed on David’s shoulder but instead of just hitting David there, the hand clenched instead, finger digging deep into David’s injury.

When they’d been hitting him in the side David had managed to remain silent, determined not to give the men any kind of reaction. Now however he couldn’t keep up that stoicism and as his tormentor’s fingers dug ever deeper into his shoulder, he let out a pain filled cry. This seemed to only encourage the man however who just applied even more force, making him cry out even louder.

As this was ongoing, David’s friends were forced to sit there and watch as their friend was effectively tortured in front of their eyes. After hearing his cries for several minutes however, Amanda finally spoke up, despite the threat of the guns pointed at them. “For Christ’s sake stop it, there’s no need for that.”

This seemed to anger the man, who released his grip on David’s shoulder and strode over to Amanda before backhanding her hard across the face. “Not necessary? It’s only what he deserves. Your ‘friend’ is just a state sponsored assassin, a man who kills on the orders of the west and persecutes my people without mercy or conscience.”

David, who was now nursing his shoulder which was a flame with pain, laughed as the man said this. Turning with fury in his eyes the man crossed the room again and stared into David with hate filled eyes even as David spoke. “I may be an assassin but you are far worse than I am. I protect innocent people from murderers like you, I have spent the last three years stopping men like you from committing acts of mass murder, and I have never taken an innocent life, not a single one in my time with The Department. All of the blood on my hands is the blood of evil men trying to make the world burn so don’t extol the evilness of what I do when you and your men are no better.”

David’s words struck a chord with his torturer who acted immediately. His hand struck out and seized David’s injured shoulder. Once again the clenched grip had David screaming in pain as the man applied more pressure than ever before. However moments later David was brought salvation from an unlikely source. Another hostage taker walked into the room and barked out some instructions in Arabic. The pressure was immediately removed and David was left gasping for breath, as the man who’d just entered the room helped David to his feet and half carried, half dragged him out of the room.

Taken upstairs, David’s pain saturated mind struggled to comprehend what was going on but as he was brought into the room above the one with the hostages, David suddenly began to understand things. The obvious leader of the hostage takers was sat in the room, a drawn Beretta in his lap and David soon found himself thrust into a seat in front of the man and left there by the man who’d brought him. For a moment neither of the men in the room spoke, but eventually the other man broke the silence and spoke to David. “Well Agent Ryder, we meet at last. That may be clichéd but I think it’s fitting in this context. I’ve heard a lot about you and you are clearly an opponent to be respected, so I don’t think I’ll be taking any chances about you turning the tables on me.”

With that the man acted without warning, the Beretta came up and fired twice, both rounds slamming into David’s chest directly over his heart. The body armour did its job perfectly, stopping the rounds before they killed David, nevertheless the impact of the rounds sent David backwards and tumbling out of his chair and to the ground. Lying perfectly still on the carpet, David did his best to hold his breath and not give away that he was still alive. The ploy worked and the leader got out of his own chair and came to stand over David’s head, the Beretta held loosely in the man’s grasp. That momentary letting down of the man’s guard was all David needed to act.

First David’s hand came up and grabbed the hand that was holding the Beretta, and then David kicked out at the man’s ankles. This brought other man to the floor and David immediately locked his legs around the man’s neck and trying to throttle the man to death. David’s opponent however wasn’t a coward and with his death flashing before him the man went crazy, his arms thrashing around and striking David across the side, shoulder and face. The sudden frenzied assault caused David’s grip to loosen and soon the man was back on his feet and charging towards David who was still lying on his back.

As he was confronted by the sight of an enraged man charging towards him, David acted quickly; he didn’t have time to think and instead acted purely on instinct. First his foot came up and was then thrust forwards into the man’s knee which stabbed with a sickening crack. This brought the man down to the ground again, screaming hysterically as he lay on the floor and clutched at his injured knee. David then took the initiative and got to his knees before pistol whipping the man across the face to stop his cries and then rolling the man onto his front before David took a firm grip and wrenched his opponent’s neck. There was another crack and stepping back David was sure the man was dead.

Dropping the Beretta, David got up and, ignoring the intense pain radiating out of his shoulder and side, he left the room and began to wake his way downstairs. As he went he was careful with his footfalls, making them as soft as possible. While the door to the room where the hostages were being kept had been closed after he’d been taken out, David knew the room was next to the stairwell and stepping too heavily would alert the captors that something was wrong. Stepping too heavily on the stairs would also alert the men watching the stairs that there was someone coming and in his present condition David would only have a chance of taking them down if he retained the element of surprise.

As it turned out, the men wouldn’t have heard David if he’d been an elephant. They were clearly so sure that they were safe that they’d plugged in their music played and were listening on full blast. This allowed David to stealthily get up right behind them, and position himself next to the cabinet that his knife and Browning had been left on, which was a stroke of luck. Seizing the knife he moved in quickly, thrusting the knife into the nearest guard’s neck right in up to the hilt. The other man remained in his own little world, unaware of the demise of his friend, David came up from behind and in an instant had his arm around the man’s neck and was squeezing the life out of him. After a few minutes the man’s thrashing got slower as he became oxygen starved and David performed to coup de grace by snapping his neck, just as he’d done to the team’s leader.

With both guards dead, David picked up the Browning and loaded the magazine smoothly before cocking the pistol ready for instant use. He felt near to collapse such was the pain from his injuries and he was sure that the stitches in his shoulder had been torn and he was bleeding through the bandages, the same for his side as well. Calling on his last energy reserves however David once again forced the pain to the back of his mind, and moved to the door, opening it slowly and carefully before poking his head out and waving the police team forwards.

Moments later David was heading back up the stairs, followed by eight fully armed men. They crept up the stairs with as much caution as David had displayed coming down but it paid off and soon all nine men were stacked up on the door to the target room without their presence being noticed by the hostage takers. Then David nodded to the sergeant of the team, they’d agreed David would be on point, the sergeant would use the battering ram and the next two men would throw in flash bangs the instant the battering ram struck the door. As the sergeant nodded back, his two men took their flash bangs off their belts and pulled the pins, ready to be thrown at a moment’s notice, while David stood just behind the sergeant who was closest to the door jamb with the battering ram held next to the lock.

A single tap on the shoulder was the signal for the assault to begin. The sergeant brought the battering ram back before sending it crashing against the door which burst open as if on command. The four flash bangs whizzed into the room and exploded a split second later. There were cries of confusion and screams of fear from inside as David and the rest of his team burst in through the smoke.

David had the Browning up and ready for action and as he appeared in the room he saw captor and captive alike lost in the confusion, noise and smoke caused by the flash bangs. Then calling on his experiences training with the SAS and The Department, David began to fire controlled double taps at any hostage taker he could clearly identify through the smoke. Two went down easily, one because David recognised him as the one who’d taken such pleasure in torturing him, the other because he was openly holding an Uzi machine pistol. Then things got more difficult, hostage takers were lying on the ground intermingled with the hostages they been holding captive. Despite that there was soon a cacophony of MP5 gunfire as the police team quickly brought down the other hostage takers, all of whom were recovering their senses and were still holding weapons.

It was all over in moments, the hostage takers were all dead apart from one who had lost his gun in the confusion and had been arrested rather than killed by the police officers. The freed hostages meanwhile were also regaining their senses and instant euphoria broke out when they realised their five and a bit hour nightmare was finally over. Everywhere there were people crying and hugging and laughing, but David wasn’t there to enjoy it with the others.

He’d made his way out of the room quietly once the smoke had cleared and the every hostage taker accounted for. Instead of celebrating he’d stumbled down the stairs and out into the streets, clutching his side and he was soon in the care of the paramedics who did what they could before rushing David off to hospital to get his stitches redone and be given a full check up. With him went Mary, Katya and Jack who’d been there to meet David the second he’d exited the house and nearly collapsed into their arms, so exhausted was he by his exertions and the pain he’d been put through.

It meant though that David wasn’t there when his absence was noticed by his university friends and he’d already been ferried off to hospital by the time his friends came out of the house and went looking for him. In fact he’d been at hospital for an hour before Amanda, who was the most visibly concerned of his friends, was finally told where David was and the fact that he wouldn’t be available for visitation. This left Amanda slightly crestfallen but not for long as her family had made their way up to the city and they were all soon reunited, taking Amanda’s mind off of David for a little while.

In the nearest hospital meanwhile, David wondered how long this stay would last and therefore how late he would be in actually going back to university to actually continue with his archaeology degree.

Chapter 45

The car coasted along the cobbles before pulling up just in front of the now infamous house. As David gazed up at the building from the passenger seat his mind went back to that day. His shoulder still hurt from what that man had done to his shoulder, even with the pain killers and the new stitches it still hurt although the doctors had assured him there had been no permanent damage and he would recover in time. Until then his arm was back in a sling and he’d been told it had to stay that way for at least a month, perhaps more.

Then the passenger door opened and Mary helped David get out of the car, which while not necessary was still nice. She and Katya had remained with David for the whole of the three days he’d been back in hospital and he’d been glad of their company the entire time and was sorry that he’d now be losing it for nearly two months. As his feet touched the cobbles of the street, David turned to see Katya had already gotten his bag out of the boot and was leading the way, taking it up to the front door of the house.

Following on behind, David fished his keys out of his pocket and inserted it into the front door before opening it and standing aside to allow Mary and Katya through. “Ever the gentleman David, thank you.”

Mary couldn’t help but remark as she walked in, while behind her David smiled at what she’d said. It was true that he almost always held the door open for people, it was just something he did but it still made a difference when people bothered to thank him for it. Then David let go of the door and allowed it the slam shut as he guided Katya and Mary along the ground floor corridor to his own room.

The trio walked in silence but that was broken as David got to his door and a sudden cry came from behind him and he was suddenly knocked backwards by Amanda who wrapped her arms around him in a very emotional embrace. After a few moments David managed to get some breathing distance between him and Amanda which gave him to opportunity to move his left arm to a more comfortable position and open the door to his room. With that David walked in followed by Amanda and then Mary and Katya, the last of whom dropped David’s bag next to the desk which was positioned under the window.

Katya and Mary stayed for a few minutes but everyone knew they’d be leaving soon and within half an hour David was saying goodbye and warmly hugging both of his pseudo sisters before they left. Then he was alone with Amanda who still hadn’t spoken to him and didn’t now, instead she kissed David warmly and that was the only message that needed to be transmitted between the two of them.

News of David’s return spread quickly through the house however and every few minutes he and Amanda were interrupted by knocking on the door as another person got back from lectures and dropped by to say hello. All of the conversations were similar however, David discovered that all of his friends had been obliged to sign the official secrets act now that they knew about his position at The Department. In return David gave a short account of his trip to hospital but despite the repetitiveness of the conversations there were two surprises in store for David. The first came from Amanda who informed him that in celebration of his return all of his friends would be going out for a meal that night and the second came in the form of a letter. This in itself was unusual for David who rarely got post but when he saw where this letter had originated its true significance became clear and so it turned out to be.

The letter came from the palace and it was addressed to a Captain Davidander Ryder of 22 Regiment SAS. It told David that in light of his actions in Afghanistan and a week ago the queen and her government had decided to award him with the Victoria Cross. The letter then went on to explicitly give the citation for David’s award but David didn’t read that bit carefully. The mere knowledge that he’d been given the highest award for bravery possible was all a bit much and he’d sat down on the bed in shock as soon as he’d gotten that far.

When Amanda had then asked what was wrong and he’d told her there had been instant excitement and David was congratulated over and over by her and everyone else who subsequently heard about the news. There were then things that needed to be organised however like getting back to London for the ceremony, and that meant calls to the Director, who David knew would have to okay everything. David was surprised however because as he the Director answered and David explained why he was calling, the Director’s response was that everything had already been organised and he’d be seeing David on the ceremony day.

For the next few weeks several things changed for David. He was able to enjoy university more without the threat of being called away for a mission hanging over his head. He was healing well, within a month he’d gotten rid of his sling and the plaster cast and he was almost back to eighty percent fitness. Then there was the awards ceremony which was a private affair. David had arrived back in London only to be immediately measured for and then given a No. 1 and No.2 ceremonial uniform in the SAS’s pattern. That done David had been whisked to the palace where he’d been guided on how to act during the ceremony, following which there had been the ceremony.

It had been over fairly quickly and then David, which the Victoria Cross pinned to his breast, had been taken back through the city and then a few hours later David was on a train and heading back to university. A few weeks later and the entire thing was a pleasant memory as David finished his first year at the university. After that he started his holiday, Katya came back from Russia and spent a couple of weeks with him, he met up with Amanda almost every day, and he saw Mary and Jack regularly as well. All in all that had been one of the most enjoyable holidays David had ever had and in later years it would sustain him when he returned to The Department and was pushed once again almost beyond his limits.

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Four years later and as his memories came to an end David noticed that the beating had already ended, and that he’d wasted the end of the story. Now he’d have to find something else to allow his mind to escape when the next beating came.

He’d been in this basement for four weeks, handcuffed the entire time and interrogated every day. Beatings had been the order of every day; sometimes they hadn’t even bothered to ask any questions to go with the beatings. Each day though he’d escaped into his own memories, going through what he now knew was a turning point in his life.

Over time though, he’d noted a change in the attitudes of his captors. They’d been beating him less and had taken to conversing with him both before and after. Whether it was an odd form of Stockholm syndrome that worked the other way round, or just carelessness, David didn’t know but as he observed the changes in his guards’ behaviour he was thankful for this sudden laxness. It allowed David to develop a plan to escape, something that would have been impossible while the guards were following their previous routine which included four armed guards around David at any one time and wrist and ankle manacles reducing his ability to move. Now there were only two guards and the ankle manacles had been discarded.

David had lost none of his edge; he’d managed to finish his degree with a 2.1 even with interruptions from The Department. But there had been fewer missions, and they’d been shorter than before, normally very specific jobs with all the preparation work complete before he was brought in. Whenever he got back his friends knew where he’d been, and they made him tell plenty of stories. During those two years David brought down terrorist cells, criminal gangs and had been inserted to spy in several regions whether that was keeping an eye on hostile nuclear states or unstable regions in Africa.

The last mission had been just after graduation, only a quick jaunt into Egypt to keep an eye on things there and when David had gotten back he’d received a request from 22 Regiment requesting he be sent to the regiment for a tour of duty with them. The Director had agreed and David had been sent post haste to Hereford and had been assigned to G Squadron. He’d quickly gelled with the team he was attached to and had served with them all over the world on several highly secretive operations. In fact he did so well there that he ended up serving with the regiment for a full year, serving with them on every continent and earning several medals to go with his Victoria Cross, this led to the joke that he was working backwards in terms of decorations.

David’s personal life hadn’t been as happy as his professional one though. His relationship with Amanda had lasted to the end of University, then it had imploded when he was sent to the SAS. He didn’t know she was now, the last he’d heard she’d just gotten an excellent training job at a top London law firm.

The break up had been hard and he’d taken himself off active duty for a couple of months as he adjusted. He’d known it was going to happen though, eventually, and he’d prepared himself for it. So less than a month and a half he’d been back on missions and proving that he was just as good as he’d ever been and that his various physical and mental injuries hadn’t caught up with him yet.

All that had led to David’s current situation. A week ago he’d walked into the office to find a new mission waiting for him. A criminal group who’d kidnapped a large multinational archaeological team off the coast of Somalia. David had been brought in because the operation might require a highly risky rescue and he was the best in The Department at achieving that kind of result, and because he could take the pressure.

The plan all along was for David to get captured by the criminals, they would then take him to the archaeologists and from there he would get them out. The first part of the plan had succeeded perfectly without any of the criminals realising they had been played; the second had also been achieved with David now on the same boat as the archaeological team. Now it was time to see if the third phase of the plan would hold up under scrutiny as it could go ahead now that the guards had relaxed things regarding David’s security.

David now knew everything he needed to enact the tricky third phase and the time to do it was that very night. As he was being taken back to the room below decks he was being held in, some way away from the main hold where the rest of the hostages were locked up, David overpowered the men, killing both quickly and quietly with only the barest rustling of chains from his handcuffs giving away what had happened. Stuffing the men in the room he’d been trapped in for weeks, David unlocked his handcuffs and grabbed his Browning, which had been taken from him when he’d been captured and kept by one of his dedicated guards. Armed, free and with the end of the mission in sight David then turned his attention to making his way to the main hold, the entrance to which was half way along the ship and up a deck from his current position. Now the rescue could finally begin.