



FOUR EXCITING SHORT STORIES

SHORT FUSES

STEPHEN LEATHER

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By Stephen Leather

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Four short stories from bestselling author [Stephen Leather](#),
plus opening chapters of six of his bestselling thrillers.

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BREAKING IN

House-breaking was a victimless crime, pretty much. That was what Richie Grout thought about his chosen profession. For a start he almost never did any actual breaking when he did the entering. There were more than enough unlocked doors and open windows around, even in South London. Nine times out of ten his method of choice was to shin up a drainpipe and into a bathroom window. Most people seemed to think that windows above ground floor were somehow unreachable. Big mistake.

And when he was in the house, he never – repeat never – hurt anyone. That was an absolute rule. If there was someone moving around, he left. Like a bat out of hell. He'd never had a confrontation, and he never would. But he knew that if he was ever confronted then he'd either run or he'd raise his hands and surrender. Grout was a thief, not a mugger. He didn't carry a weapon of any kind, not even a knife.

Not that he'd even come close to being caught in the act. Grout was too clever for that. Too clever and too prepared. He'd ended up in court, that was true. But that was always because he'd been shafted when he was trying to unload the stolen goods. And a couple of times he'd been caught by CCTV. But he'd never been caught red-handed and he planned for it to continue that way.

The things he stole were insured most of the time. And if they weren't insured then that wasn't his fault, was it? Insurance wasn't expensive and if you couldn't be bothered taking out insurance then you shouldn't start whining when someone takes your stuff.

So all in all, there were no victims. Just the insurance companies. And they were worth billions so screw them. He looked up at the drainpipe and took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself. He was wearing his usual house-breaking gear – black jeans, black Nikes and a grey hoodie. He had on tight-fitting leather gloves and a small black Adidas backpack in which he had a small Maglite torch, a set of night vision goggles, a mobile phone jammer and a nylon bag that when unrolled was big enough to hold a 32-inch flat screen television. That was one of Grout's favourite items. Televisions, BluRay players, laptops, anything like that was an easy sale. But he knew a fair bit about antiques and paintings so he always had a good look to see what was on the walls and in display cases.

He tended not to get jewellery because people kept stuff like that in their bedrooms and Grout broke into houses when people were asleep. That was when they left windows open. When they went away on holiday they locked everything and set their alarms. When they were asleep in their bedrooms they felt secure and they let their guard down. That was when Grout would move in.

His technique rarely varied. Up the drainpipe and through the window. A quick check of the upper floor to make sure no one was awake. Then downstairs, keeping close to the wall to minimise squeaks. He'd unlock the back door, then do the same with the front door. That way he had his escape routes ready. If anyone came downstairs he'd be on his toes and away, no fumbling with keys or bolts or chains.

The next step was to check for car keys. His van was parked close by but if he could find the keys then he was more than happy to relieve the owners of their vehicles. Some people took their car keys up to the bedroom but most left them in the kitchen or the hallway. The people in the house he was about to burgle had two cars. The guy drove a BMW 3 Series and his wife had a red Mini Cooper. The BMW was in the driveway and the Mini was parked in the road. Grout would be happy with either. Stealing cars was another victimless crime, he reckoned. Anyone who didn't have their car insured for theft was just asking for trouble.

Then it was time for a quick look around for valuables, then off into the night. Simple. And nobody got hurt. He'd arrived at the house at just after two o'clock in the morning and all the lights were off. The couple were always in bed by midnight, regular as clockwork. He took another deep breath, rolled his shoulders, and grabbed the drainpipe. He climbed easily, letting his legs do most of the work, and within seconds he was alongside the bathroom window. He reached for the latch, unhooked it, and slipped inside.

He stood by the shower for a while, his head cocked on one side as he listened intently for any sound that the occupants were awake. If he did hear anything he would be back out of the window and down the drainpipe. But there was nothing. He smiled to himself. It was always during the first few minutes of entering a house that he had to fight the urge to burst into the bedroom and shout "Surprise!" at the top of his voice.

He knelt down, took off his backpack and opened it. He slipped on the night vision goggles and switched them on. Soon everything was bathed in a greenish light. He took out his mobile phone jammer, a cigarette-sized stainless steel box with three aerials of varying lengths, and switched it on. It would neutralise any mobile phones within fifty feet. He put his backpack on, stood up and listened carefully again and then eased open the bathroom door and stepped out into the hall. His heart was racing so he forced himself to breathe slowly and evenly, in through his nose and out through his mouth. He kept his back to the wall as he tiptoed down the stairs.

He stopped when he was half way down. There were three doors leading off the ground floor hall. One led to the kitchen, one to a dining room and the third to the sitting room. The sitting room door was open. Grout stiffened as he realised there was a man standing by a large sofa. He was wearing a pair of night vision goggles similar to Grout's.

Grout froze, wondering what the hell was going on. The man with the night vision goggles was holding something. A knife.

Grout took a step back up the stairs and a board creaked. The man in the goggles turned to look in his direction. He was a big man, wide shouldered and with bulging forearms. He was wearing a black nylon bomber jacket and tracksuit bottoms. And on his feet, the sort of paper shoes that forensic scientists wore on the cop shows that Grout loved to watch.

The man with the knife straightened up. Grout turned to run back up the stairs. That was when the man standing behind Grout slammed something hard against the back of his head and everything went black.

WHEN GROUT opened his eyes his head was throbbing. He started to lift his right hand but realised that it was taped to the arm of a wooden chair. So was his left hand. He blinked his eyes, wondering what had happened. The lights were on and the curtains were drawn. His night vision goggles were on the coffee table. There was a flatscreen TV on one wall and a Bang and Olufsen stereo on a shelf but Grout was no longer thinking about what he could steal.

The Big Man stood next to the table. He had taken off his own goggles but was still holding the knife. It was almost a foot long with a wooden handle. A carving knife maybe. Something that belonged in the kitchen. There was blood along the length of the blade. Grout realised that the man was wearing pale blue surgical gloves. He frowned. All the thieves he knew wore gloves, but he'd never heard of anyone wearing latex ones.

"He's awake," said the Big Man. His head was shaved but there was enough hair growing back to suggest that even if he didn't shave he'd be pretty much bald. He had pale blue eyes, thin bloodless lips and large, slab-like teeth. He moved to the side and Grout saw someone else sitting on the sofa. It was a guy who lived in the house, the driver of the BMW. His head was slumped on his chest and there were flecks of blood on his shirt.

A second man walked in front of Grout. He was short, just over five six, and wearing a brown leather jacket that looked as if it was a couple of sizes too big for him. Like the Big Man he had paper covers over his shoes and was wearing blue surgical gloves. He peered at Grout and nodded. "Told you he'd wake up sooner rather than later."

Grout tried to move his legs but realised that they were also taped to the chair.

"You could have killed him, knocking him down the stairs like that."

"I didn't have time to do anything fancy," said the Little Man. He was holding sheets of kitchen roll. He had a pinched, rat-like face and some sort of growth on the side of his nose.

"Stairs clean?"

"Done and dusted," said the Little Man. He gestured at the knife in his colleague's hand. "Are you planning on taking that with you?"

The Big Man grinned. He went over to the sofa and took a close look at the man slumped there.

"Is he dead?" asked Grout.

"Not yet," said the Big Man.

"Who are you?" asked Grout. "And what the fuck's going on?"

"We were about to ask you the same thing," said the Little Man. He opened Grout's backpack and took out the phone jammer. He switched it off and showed it to the Big Man.

"Nice bit of kit," said the Big Man.

"Stops people calling the cops," said Grout.

"You don't say," said the Big Man.

The Little Man put the phone jammer and the backpack on the coffee table next to Grout's goggles. "Got all the gear, haven't you?" he said. "The jammer, the goggles. You're a real pro."

"I do my best," said Grout.

"Where did you get it from?"

“The internet,” said Grout. “You can get anything on the internet.”

“And you’re doing what? A bit of thievery?”

“That was the plan. Take what I can, hopefully lift one of the cars. Look, you can just let me go, I won’t tell anyone.”

“How did you get here?” asked the Big Man.

“Why?”

“Why? Because I want to fucking know,” said the Big Man. He raised a shovel-like gloved hand. “And if you’re not a bit more forthcoming you’re going to be getting a slap.”

“I drove,” said Grout quickly. “My van. Renault. Outside.”

“Keys?”

“My pocket.”

The Big Man lowered his hand. “That’s better.” He turned to look at the Little Man. “What do you think?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, it’s up to her, right?”

“Are you going to call her?”

The Little Man nodded. “I’ll have to.” He bit down on his lower lip. “She’s not going to be happy.”

“Shit happens,” said the Big Man. “She gets paid to make the big decisions.”

“What decisions?” asked Grout.

The Big Man pointed at Grout. “Speak when you’re spoken to or I’ll knock you out again.”

“I’ll call her now,” said the Little Man. He took his phone out of his pocket and walked into the hallway.

“You can just let me go, I won’t say anything to anybody,” Grout said to the Big Man.

“It’s not as simple as that.”

“Look, you broke in, I broke in, you and me are the same. Live and let live, hey?” Grout forced a smile. “Honour among thieves, right? Professional etiquette they call it.”

“We’re not thieves, sonny,” said the Big Man. “What’s your name?”

“Grout. Richard Grout. My friends call me Richie.”

“Yeah? Well, Richie, you chose a hell of a time to go house-breaking.”

“I’m more of a cat burglar than a house-breaker,” said Grout.

The Big Man chuckled. “Do you now?”

“Yeah, I don’t usually break in. I’m the Drainpipe King, me. Always take the easy option, that’s my philosophy. Why smash a window when there’s usually one open?”

“Makes sense,” said the Big Man. “And you’ve got the figure for it. What do you weigh? Sixty kilos?”

“Just about,” said Grout.

“See now that’s perfect for shimmying up and down drainpipes. Unless they’re plastic. So what do you do? Case the place before?”

Grout nodded. “Yeah, I walk around, see what’s what. Make notes in a little notepad I carry. During the day I see what windows are open and then I check at night. Then I look to see what

time they go to bed. Try and see who lives there, too. If there's a baby then they'll be up and down all night. If there's an old fellah then he'll be going to the toilet every hour or so. Trick is to find someone on their own with a job because they go to bed early and sleep through the night. Couples are okay, best if they've both got jobs. But no kids. If I see that a house has got kids then I give it a wide berth."

"And you make a good living?"

Grout shrugged carelessly. "Can't complain." He looked over at the man on the sofa. His head was slumped on his chest as if he was sleeping. He grimaced and looked back at the Big Man. "So who are you, the cops?"

The Big Man grinned. "Do we look like cops?"

The Little Man came back into the room. "She'll call us back," he said.

"How did she take it?"

"Mad as hell, but it's not like it's our fault. I told her the little bastard came in through the bathroom window."

"Who are you?" asked Grout. "And what are you doing here? What's going on?"

The Little Man walked over to Grout and stood looking down at him. "We're the ones asking the questions," he said. "That's why we're walking around and you're tied to the chair." He looked over his shoulder at the Big Man. "We need to get it done, the timing's got to be right," he said.

"What about him?" said the Big Man, gesturing at Grout.

"Whatever we do with him, we still have to take care of business," said the Little Man.

"Yeah, you're right," said the Big Man. He knelt down, placed the knife in the right hand of the man on the sofa, then slowly drew it across the man's left forearm, a deep cut that went from the inside of the elbow to the wrist.

Grout yelped. Blood spurted from the wound, over the man's shirt and trousers. The Big Man released his grip on the man's hand and straightened up.

"What the fuck?" shouted Grout.

"Keep your voice down or we'll gag you," said the Little Man, pointing at Grout's face.

Blood continued to pump from the wound and Grout's stomach lurched. He shuddered and closed his eyes.

"Don't like the sight of blood, huh?" asked the Big Man.

Grout took a deep breath, fighting the urge to be sick. He turned his head from the sofa and opened his eyes again. The two men were standing in front of him, smirking.

"So you're like what, MI5?"

"Doesn't matter who we are, sonny," said the Little Man.

"Yeah, you're MI5. Spooks. Like that TV show."

"We're nothing like Spooks," said the Big Man.

"More like James Bond," said the Little Man.

"Yeah, but Daniel Craig, not Roger Moore," said the Big Man.

"He was good in Moonraker, that was a fun film," said the Little Man.

“But not real.”

“They’re films. It’s all make believe.”

“But that’s what you are, right?” said Grout. “Spooks.”

“We don’t call ourselves spooks,” said the Little Man.

“Agents, then,” said Grout. “Secret agents.”

“We’re secret, that’s for sure,” said the Little Man, and he laughed. “Secret fucking squirrel, that’s what we do.”

“You break into places, don’t you? I could help you. I could sign up.”

“Sign up?” said the Little Man. He laughed again and turned to look at his companion. “Did you hear that? He wants to sign up. Have you got an application form with you?”

The Big Man laughed.

“I’m serious,” said Grout. “I could help you. I’m the most prolific housebreaker in Croydon. No one breaks into more places than me.”

“Is that right?” said the Big Man.

Grout nodded enthusiastically.

The Little Man looked at his watch. “She’s taking her time.”

The Big Man shrugged. “She has to clear it at the top. Close to the top anyway. That means getting someone out of bed.”

“Look, you could use someone like me. I could get you into places.” Grout could hear the uncertainty in his own voice. He tried not to look at the body on the sofa.

“Yeah?” said the Little Man.

“I can get in anywhere, pretty much,” said Grout. His mouth was dry and it hurt when he swallowed.

The Little Man pointed up at a sensor in the corner of the room. Red and green lights were winking. “What would you do about that? It’s a motion and heat sensor. Sets off the alarm. And the alarm here is linked to the cops.”

“Not a problem,” said Grout. “I always break in when they’re asleep and if they’re in the house then the alarm is switched off.” He grinned. “Easy.”

“Yeah, but what if the alarm is on? Suppose you get in and the alarm is beeping which means you’ve got fifteen seconds to enter the four-digit code. What do you do?” Grout shrugged.

The Little Man grinned and took something out of his pocket. It was about the size of a small phone.

“You need one of these. If you haven’t got one of these then you’re fucked with a capital F.” He put the gizmo back in his pocket. “And what about the lock? You can pick a lock, can you?”

“Some,” said Grout, but he could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

“So take the lock to this place,” said the Big Man, gesturing at the door. “It’s a six pin cylinder and saw-resistant lock with a triple striker. You could pick that, could you?”

“Probably not,” said Grout.

“Well I can,” said the Big Man. He nodded at the Little Man. “And him, he can reverse engineer any lock to produce a key in less than two hours. Now that’s the real skill.”

“Why do you need a key if you’ve already broken in?” said Grout.

“Sometimes you have to go back, and lock-picking is a pain in the arse,” said the Big Man.

“You mean steal the TV and then go back for the stereo?” said Grout.

The Big Man chuckled. “Something like that,” he said.

“I could learn stuff like that,” said Grout. “I’m a quick learner.”

“Did well at school, did you?” asked the Little Man.

“Nah, I was crap at school. But the teachers were tossers. Wasn’t my fault. But getting into houses, that I’m good at.”

“Yeah, pity they don’t teach it at university,” said the Big Man. “Get yourself a BSc in house-breaking.”

“You know how much I made last year?” said Grout.

The two men shook their heads.

“A hundred and twenty grand,” said Grout. “That’s what I got in my hand, cash, for what I took.”

The Big Man nodded, impressed. “That’s more than I earned,” he said.

“But we get a pension,” said the Little Man.

“There is that,” said the Big Man. “And job security, of course.”

“What I’m saying is, I can work for you. I could be a big help.”

“Yeah, but how many times have you been in court?” asked the Little Man.

“Never been caught,” said Grout. “Not red-handed, anyway.”

“I said in court. You’ve been in court, right?”

Grout grinned. “Loads of times,” he said. “But never been sent down. Always wear a suit to court, I do. And my old mum turns up and says what a tough childhood I had because my dad left and that I’m about to join the army and I get a letter from one of my old teachers saying what a good kid I was so I get a slap on the wrist and that’s all.”

“But that’s your problem right there,” said the Little Man. “You’re in the system. You’re known. The whole point of what we do is that no one knows us. We’re the grey men. You’re too high-profile.”

“So? So what are you going to do? You’re going to have to let me go sometime, aren’t you? Just let me go and I won’t say anything. Why would I? I broke in, didn’t I? It’s not like I’m going to tell anyone, is it?”

“Yeah, but you’re a talker, Richie. You can’t help but run off at the mouth. You’ll tell someone.”

“I won’t, I swear.”

The Little Man laughed. “Like you swore on a stack of Bibles in court that you were innocent, right? You’re a thief and a liar, Richie, there’s no way we can believe a word that comes out of your mouth.”

“So what are you going to do?” asked Grout.

The Little Man shrugged. “That’s not my call.”

“At least tell me what you’re doing here.”

“That’s need-to-know. And you don’t need to know.”

“What’s the harm?” said the Big Man. “No matter how this pans out, telling him won’t make any difference.”

“You tell him, then,” said the Little Man.

The Big Man shrugged. “Do you know who he is?” he asked Grout. He jerked his thumb at the body on the sofa. “The guy whose car you were going to steal. Have you any idea who he is?”

“Works in an office, doesn’t he? Always wears a suit. Carries a briefcase.”

“Surveillance not your strong point, then?”

“All I care about is when he gets home and what time he goes to bed.”

“And you don’t know where he’s from?”

“Don’t care.”

“Yeah, well we care,” said the Big Man. “He moves money around the world. Money that gets used by terrorists. Money that’s used to kill people.”

“So you’ve killed him, is that it?”

“Somebody had to stop him, and stop him quickly,” said the Big Man.

“So why are you still here? Why didn’t you just do it and leave?”

“Because we have to set the scene,” said The Big Man. “That’s what we do.”

“And we’re bloody good at it, too,” said the Little Man.

“I don’t understand,” said Grout, his brow furrowed.

“Of course you don’t,” said the Little Man. “Why would you?”

“We tell a story,” said the Big Man. “We tell a story to explain why he killed himself.”

“But you killed him?”

“Yes, we did. You know that and we know that but when PC Plod arrives he’s going to put two and two together and get four. He’s going to find a woman upstairs who’s been stabbed in the chest a dozen or so times. He’s going to find a man on the sofa who has cut his own wrists with the same knife. Then he’s going to look a little deeper and see that she wrote on her Facebook page that she was about to leave him. And on his Facebook page they’ll see that he wrote that he’d never let her go, that he’d rather kill her than let her go to another man.”

“There’s a dead woman upstairs?” said Grout. “His wife? She’s dead, too?”

“What we call collateral damage,” said the Little Man. “But she was as bad as him. Birds of an Al Qaeda feather.”

“So you killed them both and make it look like he killed her and then killed himself?”

“That’s what we do,” said the Little Man.

“And you do that for the Government?”

“Depends what you mean by ‘the Government’. I doubt that the Prime Minister knows we’re here. Or his deputy. Probably no one in the cabinet knows the nitty gritty. But we’re G-men, all right. Bought and paid for.”

The Little Man’s phone buzzed and he fished it out of his pocket. He pressed the phone to his ear and turned away. Grout heard him say “okay” three times and then he put the phone back in his pocket.

“What?’ asked Grout. “What’s happening? What did they say?”

The Little Man ignored Grout and turned to look at his companion. “She says green light.”

“That’s that then,” said The Big Man. He bent down and picked up a black leather holdall.

“Green light?” said Grout. “What does that mean?”

The Big Man put the bag onto a table and unzipped the top. He took out a roll of duct tape and a polythene bag.

“Doing it here?” asked the Little Man.

“Be easier to handle as a dead weight,” said the Big Man.

“Guys come on,” said Grout. “You don’t have to do this.”

“We do,” said the Little Man.

“It’s what we get paid for,” said the Big Man. “Just relax, it’ll be over soon.” He put the polythene bag under his arm and tore off a strip of duct tape. Just as Grout started to scream, the man slapped the tape across his mouth, pulled the bag over his head and began to wind duct tape around his neck.

Grout struggled but with his arms and legs bound to the chair he could barely move. His chest heaved as he fought to breathe. His lungs were burning and there were tears running from his eyes. The Big Man continued to wind the duct tape around Grout’s neck, tighter and tighter. Condensation on the polythene blurred Grout’s vision but the last thing he saw was the Little Man looking at his watch, an annoyed frown on his face. Then everything went black.

* * *

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN

THE GANGBANGER. They had two minutes. Two minutes to terrorise and rob. Two minutes was how long it would take for the train to travel between the two Tube stations. And for two minutes they would have a captive audience of up to twenty people. That meant twenty watches, twenty mobile phones, twenty wallets, and a sprinkling of MP3 players, rings and gold chains. It was easy money. Steaming is what the papers called it but Asad called it taxing. They were rich and he wasn’t so all he was doing was the Robin Hood thing.

His name was Asad, which in Somalian meant Lion. It was a good name but Asad hated it because at school they kept calling him Asda, after the supermarket chain. Asad’s parents had arrived from war-torn Somalia in the early nineties and he had been born in Ealing, West London. He’d never felt like a Londoner and never felt British, but he’d never felt Somalian either. The only time he’d ever felt that he belonged was when he’d joined a gang at the age of fourteen. The gang was called The Wonder Boys - after Stevie Wonder, because he’d sung Ebony and Ivory and unlike most of the London gangs The Wonder Boys was a multi-cultural organisation. They didn’t care about colour or religion or postcode. If you passed the gang’s

initiation then you were in. But the initiation was tough: a mugging, a stabbing and a rape. And they had to be done in a single week.

There were four of them on the platform, all wearing grey hoodies, baggy blue jeans and brand new Nike trainers, dressed the same to confuse the CCTV operators. There was Kev who Asad had known since primary school. His red hair was hidden by his hoodie. There was Robie, who had been born in Somalia but moved with his parents when he was five. He'd fallen off his father's motorcycle on the potholed roads of Mogadishu when he was two and the left side of his face was pitted and scarred. And there was Davie who was mixed race, his white mother had run off when he was a toddler and he had been brought up by his Jamaican father. At twenty-two Davie was the oldest member of the crew but Asad was in charge because it was his idea. This would be the sixth taxing that week and they hadn't even come close to being caught.

It was all down to what the Americans called shock and awe. Asad had read about it somewhere. You went in hard and you went in loud and people were so scared they just did as they were told. The trick was to hurt someone straight away, and hurt them bad. Then you had control. Most people had never experienced real violence close up and when they did they went into shock.

A Tube train was the perfect venue. It was a small, confined space with no way off while the train was moving. The passengers were sitting down, which put them at an immediate disadvantage. And during the two minutes between stations the crew could do pretty much as they wanted. Then when the train arrived at the next station, they could dash off and disappear into the crowds.

Asad felt a breeze coming from the tunnel, heralding the arrival of the next train. He moved to the edge of the platform. The other three held back. Asad would choose the carriage and he had only seconds to do it. He wanted a full carriage, but not so full that people were standing. Old people were best because they always seemed to carry a lot of cash. Women were good because they had jewellery. Teenagers were good because they always had new phones.

The train came to a halt and Asad scanned the carriage in front of him. There were four tourists standing at one of the doors, peering at the Tube map on the wall of the carriage, suitcases by their feet. Asad didn't like tourists and the suitcases would hinder movement. He moved quickly to the left and checked the next carriage. Almost every seat was occupied but there were no standing passengers. There was a West Indian woman and two teenagers in headscarves, a businessman with a briefcase on his knees, an old couple holding hands, a woman in a fur coat with a Harrods carrier bag, a schoolboy playing with an iPhone. Asad grinned. Rich pickings. He turned to his three companions and flashed them a thumbs up. Kev jogged to the single door on the left and Davie went to the door on the far right. Asad and Robie stepped into the middle of the carriage just as the doors closed.

Asad's heart was pounding and he had the beginnings of an erection. There was nothing like the thrill of terrorising a group of strangers, of knowing you had the power of life and death over them. To see the fear, to see their wide eyes and trembling hands and the way their mouths fell

open. And the blood. Blood was better than sex, way better. He looked over at Kev. Kev grinned and winked.

The train began to move. Asad waited until they entered the tunnel before pulling out his knife, a foot-long combat weapon with a serrated edge on the back of the blade. 'Right give us your fucking wallets and your mobiles and no one gets hurt!' he screamed at the top of his voice.

The passengers turned to look at him, confused frowns turning to shocked stares as they saw the knife.

Kev reached inside his trousers and pulled out a machete that he kept in a scabbard strapped to the outside of his leg. 'You heard what he said, now get your money out!' he shouted, banging the blade against a metal handrail.

The woman in the fur coat wailed and clutched her carrier bag to her chest. Next to her was the schoolboy. He was engrossed in the game he was playing and the earphones he had on meant he was oblivious to what was going on around him.

Davie and Robie pulled out their knives and started screaming obscenities.

'Everyone, do as you're fucking told!' screamed Asad. 'Give us your fucking money or you'll all get cut!'

THE COP. Brian Bedford was terrified. His hands were trembling so he folded his arms but that didn't help. The four men in hoodies were screaming and waving their knives around, their faces filled with hatred. He fought to stay calm. He had to remember everything - their faces, what he could see of them, their clothing, what they did and what they said. There were four of them and they had knives so there was nothing he could do to stop them but at least he could be a decent witness.

The white guy, the one with the machete, grabbed at a gold necklace around the neck of a young Muslim woman and yanked it from her. She screamed and tried to get it back but he slapped her with his left hand. 'Your fucking phone, bitch!' he shouted. 'Gimme your fucking phone or I'll cut you.'

'I say!' shouted an elderly man who was sitting next to his wife. He pushed himself to his feet, though his wife kept a hold of his hand and pulled him back.

'Darling, no,' she said.

'You can't do that!' shouted the old man. He appeared to be in his early seventies, wearing a tweed jacket a couple of sizes too big for him. He had a bird-like face with sharp features and greying hair.

The guy with the machete turned to glare at the old man but before he could say anything another of the muggers, black with a large combat knife, rushed over. 'Sit the fuck down!' he screamed and lashed out with the knife. The blade sliced through the man's cheek and blood spurted. The man gasped and fell back into his seat as his wife began to scream.

'Anyone who does anything is gonna get cut!' screamed the mugger, brandishing his blood-stained knife. 'Just do as you're fucking told! Now give us ya fucking phones and wallets - now!'

The old woman was using her Burberry scarf to stem the blood pouring from her husband's cheek. The mugger with the machete took phones and purses from the two Muslim girls, then grabbed the iPhone from the schoolboy. The boy began to protest and the mugger slammed the handle of the machete against the side of his face. There was a crunch of broken teeth and blood gushed over the boy's white shirt.

At the other end of the carriage, one of the muggers slapped a West Indian woman across the face but she glared at him defiantly. The mugger pulled her handbag from her. When she resisted he punched her in the face. 'You asked for it, bitch!' he screamed. He pulled a phone and a red plastic purse from her handbag and shoved it into his pocket. He tossed the handbag back onto her lap. Blood was pouring down her face and she pulled a handkerchief from her bag and held it against her nose.

Bedford felt as if his bowels were about to evacuate themselves. He was next. The black guy was going to stick the knife in his face and demand his wallet and his phone and Bedford knew he was going to do exactly what he was told. He had been a constable with the British Transport Police for almost ten years but nothing had prepared him for what had happened once the train had pulled away from the station. Now he felt weak and powerless and ashamed. He had his warrant card in his pocket but that was all he had. If this had been in the States, he'd have had a loaded gun under his jacket; but it was England so he had nothing. Part of him wanted to stand up and confront the men, to tell them to stop, and to arrest them. That's how it would work in the movies but this wasn't the movies this was real life and if he did try and stop them they'd cut him. He saw feral kids like this all the time on the job but when he was working he had on a stab vest and had his colleagues around him. Now he was alone and he was vulnerable and scared.

He looked up at the small black dome that concealed the CCTV camera that was recording everything that happened. His colleagues would see the video. They'd see him sitting and shaking and damn near pissing himself and they'd smile sympathetically and say there was nothing else that he could do but he knew behind the smiles they'd be thinking what a coward he was.

'Phone, quick,' said the black youth, holding his knife just inches from Bedford's neck.

'Okay, okay,' said Bedford. He fumbled in his pocket and took out his BlackBerry and gave it to the youth.

'And your fucking wallet! Come on!'

Bedford had to lean to the side to get his wallet out of his trouser pocket. Tears were stinging his eyes. He pulled his wallet out and gave it to the youth.

The youth jabbed his knife at Bedford's left hand. 'Gimme your fucking ring and your watch. Come on, get a fucking move on!'

'That's my wedding ring,' protested Bedford.

The youth pressed the knife against Bedford's throat. 'Yeah, and this is a fucking knife, innit?' The tip of the knife pierced Bedford's skin and he felt blood trickle down his neck. His hands trembled as he pulled his ring off and handed it over.

'And the watch! Come on, we don't have all fucking day!'

Bedford looked at his watch. His wife had given it to him on his birthday five years earlier. He swallowed and tasted vomit at the back of his mouth. He took it off and gave it to the youth. The youth grinned. 'Fuck you very much,' he said, and moved on to the next passenger – a man in his thirties wearing a black leather jacket over a faded denim shirt.

THE PASSENGER. Asad stood in front of the man. He had dark brown hair and looked as if he hadn't shaved for a day or two. He was sitting with his hands on his knees a look of cold contempt on his face. 'Gimme your wallet,' said Asad. 'And your phone. And that watch. It's a Rolex, innit?'

'Yeah. It's a Rolex.' The man's voice was flat and emotionless.

'Gimme the fucking watch. Now. And get your fucking phone out. I'm not going to tell you again.'

'You can't have my phone. I need it.'

'Say what?'

'I said you can't have my phone. I need it.' He spoke slowly this time, enunciating each word clearly as if he thought that Asad might be having trouble understanding him.

Asad gestured with the knife. 'Gimme the fucking phone or I'll cut you. I swear, I'll fucking cut you.'

'Why don't you and your pals just go and stand by the door and get off at the next stop. It'd be better all round.'

'Are you fucking mad? Can't you see this fucking knife?' Asad thrust the knife towards the man's face and held the blade under his nose. 'The man didn't flinch and continued to stare at Asad. 'I'll cut ya, I'll fucking well cut you.'

The man tilted his head to one side as he stared at Asad. 'This isn't going to end well, you know that?'

'Asad, mate, thirty seconds,' shouted Wayne. 'Cut him, for fuck's sake!'

'You asked for it,' snarled Asad, drawing back the knife. The man continued to stare at Asad's face, his face a blank mask. Then his left hand moved, so quickly that Asad didn't see it happen. One second the hand was resting on the man's leg. The next it had grabbed Asad's knife hand, just below the wrist. Asad tried to pull his hand away but the man's grip was like a vice.

The man's right hand moved this time, a short economical movement that seemed again to be instantaneous. One second it was on his right leg, then in the blink of an eye it was fastened around Asad's knife hand, his fingers digging into the joint by Asad's thumb.

Asad's hand immediately went numb and the knife clattered to the floor. The man seemed to flow as he stood up, using both his hands to swing Asad's arm in a wide arc. Asad screamed helplessly but the more he tried to fight the movement, the more it hurt. The man continued the arc and there was a loud cracking sound as the arm popped out of the shoulder joint. Asad's legs buckled and the man let him fall.

Asad tried to get up, cursing. The man raised his right leg and stamped on Asad's knife hand hard enough to shatter most of the fingers. Asad passed out.

There were two muggers to the man's left, one to his right. The one on his right was Wayne. He was already moving towards the man, his lips drawn back in a savage snarl. The man stepped over Asad, his arms loose at his sides. There was no fear in Wayne's face, just anger and hatred. Wayne had the knife, the man had nothing so in Wayne's mind the man was already cut and bleeding.

The man stood his ground and waited. 'You cunt!' screamed Wayne. 'I'm gonna cut you, you fucking cunt!'

The man said nothing. In Wayne's world, shouting and posturing was the prelude to violence. But the man knew words were superfluous. The only thing that mattered was what you did. It was a mistake to start a fight with insults. Then Wayne made his second mistake, pulling back the knife to get ready to stab. Once Wayne had pulled his arm back, his options were limited. The man exhaled slowly and waited, his arms still loose and relaxed.

Wayne grunted as he thrust the knife forward - his third mistake because the grunt preceded the move and it gave the man all the time he needed. He jabbed with his left hand, catching Wayne just below the wrist and pushing his arm to the side. At the same time, the man swivelled on his right leg and drew back his left as Wayne's momentum kept him moving forward.

Wayne didn't have time to register surprise, his face was still contorted in rage as he found himself moving past the man. The man had a dozen options, most of which would kill or permanently incapacitate Wayne but all he wanted to do was get off the train in one piece so he settled for an elbow strike. He brought his right elbow around in a tight arc that clipped Wayne on the chin, jerking his head to the side and breaking his jaw with a loud pop. Wayne's knife fell to the floor and he staggered against the two housewives. They screamed and pushed him away and he rolled onto the floor.

He was dazed but still conscious and he scrambled to get to his feet. The man kicked the knife away then kicked Wayne in the side of the head, taking care to avoid the temple. He wanted Wayne unconscious, not dead. He judged the kick perfectly and Wayne went still.

The man had been counting off the seconds in his head from the moment Wayne had shouted at Asad. Eight seconds had passed. Twenty-two were left.

He turned to face the remaining two muggers. They were standing together at the far end of the carriage. The man waited to see what they would do. It was their call. They could wait and get off the train or they could attack him. Truth be told, he didn't care either way. The situation couldn't get any better and it couldn't get any worse. It just needed to be resolved and he was happy enough to let them make the decision.

They were both young. The black one was in his late teens, the mixed race was a few years older. There wasn't enough room for them to stand shoulder to shoulder which cut down the advantage of numbers. The mixed race guy was in front, wielding a short samurai sword. He was left-handed, but the man didn't see that as a problem.

'Go on, Kev, stick him. Stick him, man!' shouted the black mugger.

The man stared at Kev, focussing on his eyes. The eyes would tell him what Kev planned to do. Kev began to move the knife from side to side in a slashing motion. That was harder to deal

with than a stab, the man knew. And the knife looked sharp; sharp enough to cut his stomach wide open even through the jacket he was wearing.

The man pointed at Kev's face, then moved his hand quickly to the right. As Kev's eyes instinctively followed, the man's left hand reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. As Kev looked back at the man he snarled, realising that he's been tricked, and then the man tossed the coins at his face. Kev's hands went up to protect his eyes, another instinctive reaction, one that got the knife out of the way and exposed Kev's vulnerable body parts.

The man was close enough to punch but he went for a kick instead, slamming his foot into Kev's groin. Kev's breath exploded from his lungs and he doubled forward. The man reached for the knife and pulled it from Kev's hand, then grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pushed him down on the floor. Kev went down onto his knees. The man transferred the knife from his right hand to his left and then punched Kev hard on the chin. His eyes glazed over and he pitched forward without a sound.

The man straightened up and stared at the last mugger. He was standing with his back to the door that led to the adjacent carriage holding his knife low, close to his groin. He looked left and then right as if hoping there was some way off the moving train. The man was holding Kev's knife down at his side.

The man was still counting off the seconds. Sixteen seconds had passed. Fourteen to go. Adrenaline was coursing through his system putting everything into overdrive. His mind was racing, considering all his options, and his hands and feet were ready to do whatever was necessary. He wasn't scared – he'd been in situations like this before. Again he was waiting for the mugger to make up his mind. Once the mugger had chosen his course of action the man would react accordingly. He wasn't scared, he wasn't even apprehensive, he was simply waiting. And this time he was waiting with a knife.

'You come near me and I'll fucking stab ya!' shouted the mugger. The man could hear the uncertainty in his voice. The decision had been made. He wasn't going to attack. The man waited. Then the train began to brake and almost immediately burst into the station. Posters advertising holidays in the sun and cheap phone calls flashed by but the man ignored them. He was totally focussed on the mugger; reading his body language, watching his eyes. He'd decided not to attack but decisions could be changed.

The train came to a halt with a lurch but the man maintained his balance effortlessly, on the balls of his feet. The door opened. 'Fuck you, man!' screamed the mugger, then he turned and ran. He hurtled down the platform, pushing waiting passengers out of the way. The man let the knife fall to the floor.

There were audible sighs of relief from around the carriage. The businessman with the briefcase knelt down by Wayne and pulled his mobile phone and wallet out of the unconscious man's pocket. Then he took out a purse and another phone and handed it to the West Indian lady who thanked him. She was holding a blood-stained handkerchief to her nose. 'It's not me you should thank, it's him,' said the businessman.

She took her bloody handkerchief away from her nose, smiled up the man and mouthed 'bless you'.

The man nodded and headed for the door.

'Hey, you can't go,' said Bedford, standing up. He put a hand on the man's shoulder.

The man turned around. 'You don't want to do that,' he said.

Two teenagers started to get on the train, saw the bodies and backed away.

'You're going to have to stay here,' said Bedford, letting go of the man's shoulder. He took out his BTP warrant card and showed it to him.

'That's not going to happen,' said the man.

'Don't worry, you're not in trouble. Everything you did was in self-defence. But the investigating officers will want to talk to you.' He reached over and tripped the handle that would stop the train moving out of the station.

The man shook his head. 'No. I'm in the middle of something. I've got to go.'

'I could arrest you.'

The man smiled tightly. 'You could. But bearing in mind what just happened, do you really think you can keep me here?'

'If you do run off, we can track you down.' Bedford pointed at the CCTV camera in the roof of the carriage. 'It's all been filmed.'

'Trust me, by this evening it won't have been.'

Bedford frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that by this evening the people I work for will make sure there's no record of what happened.'

'I'll know.'

'Sure you will. But my boss will call your boss and he'll tell you to forget what you saw. And you will.'

'Who are you?'

'Me? I'm no one, mate. Look, best you just take credit for this, no one's going to dispute anything you say. It'll look good on your record and you might even get a commendation.'

'You're not a cop?'

The man smiled. 'No. I'm not a cop.'

'MI5? MI6?'

The man looked at his watch. 'I've got to go. I've got a phone call to make within the next five minutes and if I don't make it, some very bad things are going to happen.'

'You can't...' said Bedford but fell silent when the man flashed him an icy stare. Bedford raised his hands and stepped to the side to allow the man off the train.

The man turned and looked at Bedford. 'Mate, play your cards right and you'll be the hero here. We need heroes at the moment, more than anything.' With that he headed down the platform towards the exit.

The train driver walked down the platform, his face like thunder. He stepped into the carriage and his jaw dropped as he saw the three men on the floor. Bedford flashed his BTP warrant card. ‘Bloody hell, what happened?’ asked the driver.

Bedford didn’t reply. He bent down to retrieve his wedding band, wallet and watch.

‘Who did this?’ asked the driver.

‘Nobody,’ said Bedford. ‘Nobody did it.’

* * *

So who was the mystery man on the train? I like to think that it was Spider Shepherd, hero of my thriller series. Shepherd is a former SAS trooper who becomes an undercover cop, works for the Serious and Organised Crime Agency and then moves on to work for MI5. You can read his adventures in *Hard Landing*, *Soft Target*, *Cold Kill*, *Hot Blood*, *Dead Men*, *Live Fire*, *Rough Justice*, *Fair Game*, and *False Friends*.

If you prefer your stories less violent, here’s a free short story for you – Inspector Zhang and the Hotel Guest -

INSPECTOR ZHANG AND THE HOTEL GUEST

Inspector Zhang removed his spectacles and polished them with a large red handkerchief as he waited for the Indian receptionist to finish her phone call. It was a hot day, even for tropical Singapore, and he was already regretting the five-minute walk to the Clarke Quay MRT station to the Best Western Hotel in Carpenter Street. His wife had borrowed his car to visit one of her relatives in Malaysia, his sergeant’s car was being serviced, and there were no cars available in the office pool so he had no option other than to use the mass transit system. The receptionist put down the receiver, flashed him a professional smile, and asked him how she could help. “My name is Inspector Zhang of the Singapore Police Force,” he said. “I am with the CID at New Bridge Road.” He nodded at his companion, a twenty-four-year-old Chinese woman in a pale green suit with her hair tied up in a neat bun. “This is my colleague, Sergeant Lee. Sergeant Lee smiled and held out her warrant card. “I believe it was the manager who called us,” said Inspector Zhang, putting away his wallet. “About a body.”

The receptionist gasped. “A body? Here? Are you sure?”

“Can I speak to the manager? I am told he is a Mr Leutzinger.”

The receptionist hurried to a back room and reappeared with a tall, cadaverous man in a black suit. He shook hands solemnly with Inspector Zhang. The manager’s nails were beautifully manicured and glistened as if they had been given a coat of varnish. “I am afraid you have been misinformed, Inspector. We didn’t report a body. What we reported to the police was that we

had somebody in the hotel. A man who has lost his memory. He has no idea who he is but he is very much alive.”

“And why do you require the services of the police?” said Inspector Zhang, frowning.

“Because he has no money. No identification. And no idea who he is or where he is supposed to be.”

Inspector Zhang nodded thoughtfully. “Very well,” he said. “Where is this gentleman?”

“Upstairs, in room 302.”

“But if he has checked in, he must have shown his passport or ID card. And you would have checked his credit card.”

“That’s the problem, Inspector Zhang. It’s not his room. But he has the keycard.”

“So who did book the room?”

“A Mrs Petrova. From Russia. She has been out all day.”

“But this man in the room now, he had the correct keycard for the room?”

The manager nodded. “He let himself in and the chambermaid found him there when she went in to clean the room. It’s all a bit of a mystery, I’m afraid.”

A smile spread across Inspector Zhang's face. There was nothing that Inspector Zhang liked more than a mystery, but in low-crime Singapore they were few and far between. “Indeed it is,” he said. “Let us go and talk to the gentleman.”

They went up in the lift together, then along the corridor to room 302. The manager knocked gently on the door. It was opened by a Westerner in a dark blue suit, his tie loose around his neck. He was holding a damp towel to the back of his head. He was in his forties, with jet-black hair and a neatly-trimmed greying moustache.

Inspector Zhang introduced himself and Sergeant Lee as the man sat down on the bed and dabbed at his head with the towel.

“Are you hurt?” asked Inspector Zhang.

“I have a bump on the back of my head,” said the man. He showed the towel to the inspector. “There’s no blood, so I don’t think It’s too bad.”

“We said that he should see a doctor but he insisted that he was all right,” said the manager.

There was a chair in front of a dressing table and Inspector Zhang moved it so that he could sit down opposite the man. “I am told you do not know who you are,” he said.

The man nodded. “I can’t remember anything. Not a thing.”

“You sound English. From the south of England perhaps, but I am not very good at accents. Are you from England?”

The man shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I think you are. You are definitely not American, Australian or South African.”

“I’m sorry. Really. I can’t help you.” He dabbed at the back of his head with the wet towel. “I don’t know where I’m from. Everything before I set foot in this hotel is a blank.”

“And you have no wallet? No identification?”

The man shrugged again. “I think I might have been robbed,” he said.

“That seems highly likely,” said Inspector Zhang. “You are dressed like a businessman but I don’t see a briefcase?”

“If I had one, it was probably stolen.”

“No mobile phone?”

The man shook his head.

“And you have no idea if you live in Singapore or if you are a visitor?”

“I’m sorry. This is crazy, isn’t it?”

“It is unfortunate,” said Inspector Zhang. “But it does happen. A blow to the head can cause temporary amnesia.”

“If he arrived at the airport immigration will have his photograph,” said Sergeant Lee.

“My colleague is correct,” Inspector Zhang said to the man on the bed. “And of course if you are a citizen or a permanent resident your fingerprint and photograph will be on your National Registration Identity Card. So one way or another we will be able to find out who you are, sooner rather than later.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“From my first impression I would say that you live in Singapore, either as a citizen or a permanent resident. And I would say that you are married, so I’m sure that your wife is looking for you.”

“Why do you think that?” asked the man.

Inspector Zhang spoke to the man in rapid Mandarin, but it was clear from the blank look on his face that he didn’t understand.

“And as you don’t understand Mandarin. I would think that the person you live with is not Chinese. Probably a Westerner like yourself.”

The manager stared incredulously at Inspector Zhang. “Inspector, I can clearly see that he is not wearing a wedding band, so why would you think that he is married?”

“He is not wearing a wedding band now, but you can see that the skin is paler around the base of the wedding finger, so he does normally wear a ring,” said the inspector. “But it was more his suit that suggests he is living with someone.”

“My suit?” said the man.

“Do you like cats?” asked Inspector Zhang.

“Cats?”

“Felines. Are you a cat person or a dog person? People tend to favour one or the other. Myself, I prefer dogs though unfortunately they are not allowed in my building.”

The man ran a hand through his hair. “Dogs, I think.” He nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, dogs.”

“But your wife, she is a cat person, I’m sure.”

The man shook his head, bemused. “How can you possibly know that,” he said.

“Because you have white cat hairs on the legs of your trousers, as if a cat has been rubbing itself against your legs. But there are no similar hairs on your jacket. In my experience cat lovers pick up their pets so from that I deduce that you are not a cat lover but probably live with someone who is. And the pale skin on your wedding finger suggests a wife.”

The man looked at his hand. "They must have taken my wedding ring when I was mugged," he said. "And my watch." He held out his left arm. "They've taken my watch, too."

"What about your spectacles?"

"My spectacles?" said the man. "I'm not wearing spectacles."

"But you have the small indentations either side of your nose that suggests you do have problems with your vision."

The man reached up with his left hand and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Everything is a bit blurry. I thought it was the bang on my head."

"Do you have a packet of cigarettes on you?" asked Inspector Zhang.

The man frowned. "Do you think I smoke?"

"There are faint nicotine stains between your first and second fingers on your right hand," said Inspector Zhang. "I would tend to think that you have given up recently. This is a no-smoking room so if you are still smoking then that would suggest you were not staying here."

"I went through all my pockets and there were no cigarettes and no lighter." He smiled. "But now that we are talking about cigarettes, I do feel like having one."

"Then I think I am right, you are a smoker who has recently given up the habit," said Inspector Zhang. "Now tell me, what is the first thing you do remember?"

"I was outside the hotel," said the man. "I went through my pockets and found the keycard. It was in the little folder that had the room number so I came to see if there was anything here that would jog my memory."

"And there isn't?"

The man waved his hand around the room. "There's nothing here, as you can see."

Inspector Zhang looked over at the manager. "The guest who checked in had no luggage?"

"Apparently not," said Mr Chung.

"Would that be unusual?"

"Not if the guest was here for business. Sometimes guests check in first thing in the morning and then check out that evening. We are very well located for the business district."

"And Mrs Petrova was a regular guest?"

"I will have to check," said the manager.

"What am I going to do?" asked the man.

"If you would please wait here," said Inspector Zhang. "If we do not solve this mystery shortly then we will take you to New Bridge Road station." He nodded at Sergeant Lee. "If you do remember anything then please tell my sergeant straight away."

Inspector Zhang went down to the ground floor with the manager to reception. There he tapped on a computer and peered at the screen. "It's the first time that Mrs Petrova has stayed here," he said.

"And she paid by credit card?"

"Yes, just for the one night."

"And was a Russian?"

The manager nodded. "She showed a Russian driving licence as her ID."

“Can you show me the CCTV footage?” asked Inspector Zhang.

The manager took him through a side door into a windowless office. There was a desk on which there was a computer and a leatherbound diary, and against one wall was a bookcase filled with neatly-labelled files.

On a table in one corner was a computer monitor on which were half a dozen views from CCTV cameras located around the hotel. The manager sat down in front of the computer and reached for the mouse. “What would you like to see, Inspector?” he asked.

“Mrs Petrova checking in,” said Inspector Zhang, sitting down next to the manager and adjusting the creases of his trousers.

The manager clicked on a menu and after a few seconds they were looking at a view of the reception desk where the Indian receptionist was handing a keycard to a blonde woman wearing impenetrable sunglasses and a floppy hat.

“It’s difficult to see her face,” said Inspector Zhang.

“It is a hot day and fair skin burns easily,” said the manager.

The woman walked to the lifts. She was wearing a blue and white dress and had a Louis Vuitton shoulder bag. It seemed to Inspector Zhang that she deliberately kept her head turned away from the CCTV camera.

“And what time did the gentleman arrive?” asked Inspector Zhang.

The manager peered at the time code at the bottom of the screen. It said 10.35am. “About two hours later.”

“Be so good as to show me,” requested the inspector.

The manager clicked the mouse and a fresh picture filled the screen, this from a camera covering the lifts. The man came into view through the main entrance and walked over to the lift.

“That’s interesting,” said the inspector.

“What?” asked the manager, turning around in his chair.

“He doesn’t appear to be hurt. And if he had just been attacked, why didn’t he go to the receptionist? Why didn’t he ask for her to call the police?”

“Perhaps he was confused. Perhaps he didn’t realise that he had been attacked. He has amnesia. Perhaps he forgot everything.”

“Also I don’t see him holding the keycard,” said Inspector Zhang. “He said that he found the keycard in his pocket and that’s why he went up to the room.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “So tell me, do you have CCTV cameras inside the lifts?”

“Of course,” said the manager. He clicked on the mouse, scrolled down a menu and after a few seconds a CCTV picture of the man entering the lift filled the screen. The man reached out with his right hand to press the button for the third floor and then stood facing one of the mirrored walls and tidied his hair with both hands.

“That’s interesting,” said Inspector Zhang.

“What is?” asked the manager.

“Can you freeze the picture where he is arranging his hair?”

The manager clicked the mouse, then the picture froze.

“You’re looking to see if there is a wound?” asked the manager.

“There would be nothing to see,” said Inspector Zhang. “There is no blood, just a bump. No, Mr Leutzinger, I am admiring the watch on his wrist. It appears to be a very expensive Rolex.”

“But his watch was stolen, along with his wallet and everything else.”

“Exactly,” said Inspector Zhang.

The manager frowned. “So you think he was lying about the mugging?”

“Oh no,” said Inspector Zhang. “That’s not what he’s lying about.” He stood up. “Let’s go back upstairs and I’ll explain everything,” he said.

They went back up to the third floor where the man was still sitting on the bed and dabbing the towel on the back of his head.

Inspector Zhang sat down opposite the man and looked at him solemnly. “It is time to tell the truth,” he said. “If you continue to lie, then you will be in even more trouble than you are now.”

The man looked confused. “What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the fact that you were not attacked outside. In fact you were attacked here, in this room, by Mrs Petrova, though I doubt that is her real name. But I am sure that you came here to see her and that she, with or without an accomplice, robbed you.”

“I told you, I can’t remember anything.” He looked across at Sergeant Lee, hoping that she would agree with him, but she looked back at him impassively.

“Let me tell you what I think happened,” said Inspector Zhang. “I think you came here specifically to meet Mrs Petrova. It was your first meeting and I think perhaps you met her on the internet. Maybe in a chat room. Or one of those social networking sites that are so popular these days.”

“Nonsense,” said the man.

A smile spread slowly across the inspector’s face. “But how can you say that if you’ve truly lost your memory?” he said. “If you really have no memory of what happened before you were attacked, then surely anything is possible.”

The man swallowed nervously but said nothing.

“Well then let us consider the evidence,” continued Inspector Zhang. “In my experience muggers do not take men’s wedding rings. They take women’s jewellery, of course, and diamond rings, but generally not wedding bands. And they certainly don’t bother stealing spectacles. I therefore assume that you removed the ring and the spectacles yourself. Now why would a man do that?” He turned to look at his sergeant. “What do you think, Sergeant Lee?”

She looked up from her notebook, in which she had been scribbling furiously. “The glasses to make himself more attractive, the ring because he wanted to appear unmarried?” she said.

Inspector Zhang nodded approvingly. “And did you notice that he dyes his hair? It was unnaturally black for a man of his age and you could see where the roots are grey. He is a man who takes pride in his appearance, who likes to look good for the ladies.” He turned back to the man. “Isn’t that so?”

The man’s shoulders slumped. He dropped the towel on the bed and sat with his head in his hands. “I’ve been a fool,” he said.

“Yes, you have,” agreed the inspector. “But now is the time to tell the truth. What is your name?”

“Fisher,” the man mumbled. “Sebastian Fisher.”

“And you live in Singapore?”

The man nodded but didn’t look up. “I’m a stockbroker. I sell stocks and shares.”

“And your office is nearby?”

“The man nodded.”

“And you came here to meet Mrs Petrova.”

“She said she was here on business and wanted to meet me. She said she was in an unhappy marriage and that she....” He sighed. “I was a fool.”

“Mrs Petrova will not be her real name, of course. She knocked you unconscious and robbed you?”

“It wasn’t her. I was looking at her when I was hit. When I came around they’d taken my money, my wallet, my watch. Everything. I was sitting on the bed when the chambermaid came in. She asked me what I was doing in the room and I panicked.”

“You could have simply told the truth,” said Inspector Zhang.

“And tell everybody why I’d gone to her room? And why I wasn’t wearing my wedding ring. What possible reason could I give for being there? Then I saw the keycard on the bedside table and I said that I’d let myself in because I’d lost my memory and found the card in my pocket.”

“Your wedding ring and your spectacles are in your office?”

Fisher nodded.

“I think we will find that Mrs Petrova and her accomplice have been doing this elsewhere,” said Inspector Zhang. “Street muggings are rare in Singapore, but inviting their victim to a hotel makes everything much easier. I have no doubt we will discover that the credit card she used was not hers. I assume you told her you were well off?”

“I wanted to make a good impression,” said Mr Fisher. “I know, I was stupid.”

Inspector Zhang took off his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. “So tell me, Mr Fisher,” he said. “Your wife is the cat-lover in your house, was I correct?”

Mr Fisher nodded sadly. “She loves those cats more than she loves me,” he said, putting his head in his hands. “That’s part of the problem.”

“And you do smoke?”

“I’ve told my wife that I’ve given up, but yes, I do sneak out for a cigarette. I feel like a prisoner sometimes.” He looked up at Inspector Zhang. “Does my wife have to know about this?”

“All I need from you is a statement about the robbery,” said Inspector Zhang. “I am prepared to overlook your memory lapse. As to what you do or don’t tell your wife, that is completely up to you.” He replaced his spectacles. “But speaking as a man who has been married for thirty years I can tell you that it’s best never to try to keep a secret from a wife. They tend to find out the truth about everything, eventually.”

“A bit like yourself, Inspector Zhang,” said Sergeant Lee, and the inspector beamed happily.

There are five more Inspector Zhang stories available – Inspector Zhang Gets His Wish, Inspector Zhang and the Falling Woman, Inspector Zhang and the Perfect Alibi, Inspector Zhang and the Dead Thai Gangster, and Inspector Zhang and the Disappearing Drugs.

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* * *

CAT'S EYES

It was her eyes that I noticed first, even though I was sitting about thirty feet away from where she was dancing. They were cat-like and as black as coal and she'd emphasised them with mascara and eyeliner, but even without the make-up they would have stopped me in my tracks.

I was in Rainbow Two, on the ground floor of Nana Plaza. There are four Rainbow bars and they're geared up for Japanese customers rather than Westerners which means that most of the girls play on being cute and young with vacant stares and their hair in curls or pigtails.

She was different, not Japanese-style at all. And she had her hair up, held in place with a clip, which is unusual for a go-go dancer. She wasn't young either; I doubted that she would see thirty again. She had a real woman's figure, nice full breasts and hips that curved. And those eyes. My God, those eyes.

She was dancing around a chrome pole but when she locked eyes with me she stopped dancing and smiled. It was a full-on smile, loaded with self-confidence as if she knew exactly what effect her smile had on a man.

When the dancing shift changed she came and sat down next to me. Her name was Cat and she was from Surin, close to the border with Cambodia. She asked me my name and I told her. Roger. From London. Actually I'm Simon from Maidstone, but I know enough about the Bangkok bar scene to know that it's best not to reveal your real name up front. I bought her a drink and we chatted for a while, her fingernails gently scratching my thigh as if they had a mind of their own. Her English was good and she had a great sense of humour which usually means a succession of Western boyfriends. When it was time for her to dance again, she stood up to go.

I asked her how much she charged for short-time. She flashed me her smile and her eyes locked on mine. "Everything you have in your wallet," she said.

I laughed and shook my head and paid her bar fine. Ten minutes later we were in the short-time hotel on the second floor of the plaza. Her lovemaking was intense and passionate and for most of the time she was looking deep into my eyes as if she could see into my soul. It's not normally like that, usually the girls want the sex to be as impersonal as possible, something to be gotten out of the way so that they could collect their money and get back to the bar.

Cat seemed in no rush to go and after the sex was over she lay down next to me and stared up at the ceiling. I asked her why she was working in the bar. With her eyes and her body and her personality, I doubted that she'd have any problem finding a boyfriend or a sponsor.

"You want to know my story?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Okay, I'll tell you," she said. She sighed and carried on staring up at the ceiling. "The first time I met my husband, I was twelve and he was twenty-two."

"What? Twelve?"

She continued to talk as if she hadn't heard me.

"He came to our village to stay with his aunt and when I looked at him I knew that he was the love of my life. But what could I do? I was twelve. Every night I prayed to Buddha and asked him why he had done this to me, why had he shown me the man I loved but made it impossible for me to be with him? Eventually the man moved away and I was heartbroken. It wasn't fair. When I was a teenager lots of boys wanted to be with me, but I turned them all down. I knew what it meant to be in love and I didn't want to settle for anything less. When I was twenty I fought with my mother because she said it was time for me to marry but I said I wouldn't marry unless I loved the man, and I had already met the man I loved. She said I was crazy."

She sighed again. "When I was twenty-one I went on holiday with my friends to Cha-Am. We stayed in a hotel by the beach. On the day we were due to go back to the village I met him in the street. He was on holiday with his friends. We literally bumped into each other. He looked into my eyes and I knew at that moment that he felt the same. He hadn't married, he hadn't even had a regular girlfriend. He told me later that he felt as if he was waiting for somebody - he just hadn't realised that it was me he was waiting for."

She turned to look at me and smiled. Her killer smile. And again I was lost in her eyes. "I never left his side from that day on and three months later we were married. He worked for Thai Airways at the airport and we had a really nice house that his parents bought for us. They were quite rich and he was their only son. They were so pleased when I got pregnant and we had a lovely baby boy. Our son was so handsome, just like his father. I was so, so happy. Every night I prayed to Buddha and thanked him for giving me my perfect family."

She stopped talking and rolled onto her back again. I watched her chest rise and fall as she breathed.

"What happened?" I asked quietly.

"They died," she said. "Three years ago. It was a car accident. He was driving home with my son and a truck smashed into the car. Killed them just like that. The truck driver had been taking drugs, the police said. He ran away but they caught him. He's still in prison. But I lost my husband and my son."

She sighed and turned to look at me. There were tears in her eyes. "That's why I work in the bar. I cannot be alone at night. I cannot sleep. In the bar I can be busy and I don't have time to think. And when I go with customers I can forget who I used to be. I don't want to think about who I used to be. Because when I think, I feel sad and I want to die so that I can be with my

husband and my son.” She smiled but the tears were still running down her cheeks. She shrugged. “And that’s my story.”

She stayed on the bed as I got up and dressed. I took out my wallet and emptied it. I gave her everything I had. That night I walked home. And I never went back to Rainbow Two, because I knew that if I looked into her eyes again I’d be lost forever.

* * *

There are three stories available in the Asian Heat series – [Banging Bill’s Wife](#), The Alphabet Game, and The Pregnant Wife. There are all much longer than Cat’s Eyes, though I do plan to write more short short stories !

* * *

My novel The Bombmaker was filmed for Sky One and starred Dervla Kirwan as the title character, whose daughter is kidnapped. The kidnappers don’t want money, they want her to return to her former life and build a massive fertiliser bomb in the centre of London. Here are the first few chapters -

THE BOMBMAKER

IT WASN’T an especially big bomb. Just a couple of pounds of Semtex, a detonator, a small digital clock and a mercury tilt switch. The man carrying it wasn’t overly afraid he knew that the device had been tested a dozen times, with a light bulb from a torch in place of the detonator. There was no way it could explode prematurely. The timer was set to activate its circuit in thirty minutes’ time, and even then the device wouldn’t explode until it was moved and the mercury tilt switch was tripped. A third circuit, separate from the first two, contained a photoelectric cell linked to a second detonator. The Bombmaker had explained everything to him before closing the lid of the box and placing it in the blue holdall, the holdall that he was now carrying as casually as if it contained nothing more threatening than football kit.

The man looked left and right, then squeezed through a gap in the railings and went down the embankment to the railway tracks. He walked along the sleepers, confident that there wouldn’t be a train for at least an hour, by which time he’d be long gone. He took a quick look at his wristwatch. Plenty of time. Plenty of time to place the bomb at the designated location, then to get to the phone box and make the coded call. This wasn’t a bomb designed to kill, it was meant to disrupt. To tie up the police, the army and a bomb disposal team. That’s not to say that it wasn’t a serious bomb, but the men who turned up to deal with it would be experts. They’d X-ray it before touching it and they’d see the circuits and then they’d blow it up with a controlled charge. In effect, they’d be blowing up the railway line themselves. Hours of disruption. Great

publicity. And a reminder that they had the ability and the supplies to do harm. A nudge, that's all it was, though the man carrying the holdall knew that it was a nudge capable of leaving a crater twenty feet wide.

Ahead of him was the entrance to a tunnel. He walked up to it and left the holdall a few feet inside. The fact that it was in darkness and close to the tunnel wall would make it that much harder to deal with. They'd need lights, and they'd know that if it did go off the tunnel would direct the blast outwards. Plus they'd also have to close the road that ran above the railway line. Two birds with one stone.

He went back along the tracks and climbed up the embankment, then walked along the road. A blue Fiat pulled up alongside him and he climbed in. "Okay?" said the driver, a cigarette sticking out of the side of his mouth.

The man nodded but didn't say anything. The driver was a driver, nothing more. Told where and when to pick him up and where to take him. The man looked at his watch again. Everything was going to plan.

LUCY METCALFE hated it when her brother played rough. She was a year older than Tim but he was bigger and stronger and lately he seemed to take great pleasure in pushing her around. He was worse when his friends were with him. They were kicking a football, but every time Lucy got it, Tim would immediately tackle her, charging in with his shoulder and pushing with his elbows. "Mine, mine," he'd shout, before taking the ball off her. It wasn't even as if they were trying to score goals they were just passing the ball to and fro, on their way back from school.

"You're a bully!" she shouted at her ten-year-old brother as he barged into her for the umpteenth time and dribbled the ball away. She stood rubbing her shoulder and glaring at him sullenly.

Tim stopped and put a foot on top of the ball. "Yeah?" he said.

"Yeah. It's supposed to be a game."

"Yeah? Well, I'm better than you are."

"No, you're not better. You're bigger. And Uglier. And stupider."

Tim's friends giggled and his cheeks reddened. He kicked the ball at her, hard, but missed her by several feet. The ball bounced on the kerb and skidded across a strip of grass before disappearing through a line of rusting metal railings. "Now look what you've done!" Tim shouted. "Go and get it."

"Why should I get it? It wasn't my fault."

"I was kicking it to you."

Lucy shook her head and folded her arms across her chest in the way she'd seen her mother do when she was insisting that they go to bed early. "You were kicking it at me, not to me," she said. "You were the last to touch it. You get it."

Tim clenched his fists and took a step towards her. Lucy turned and ran, her school bag banging against her hip. "Chicken!" Tim shouted, and started making loud clucking noises. His friends joined in. Tim waited until his sister was out of sight before ducking through the railings

and sliding down the embankment. His friends followed him, shouting and screaming and flapping their arms like demented crows.

The ball was at the mouth of the tunnel. Tim ran over to it and picked it up. As he bent down, he saw something a few feet inside the entrance. A blue holdall. "Hey, there's something here," he yelled. He kicked the ball over to his friends and walked into the tunnel. He was surprised how much colder it was and he shivered. He turned to look at his friends as if to reassure himself that they were still there. He suddenly felt a lot less brave. "Come on!" he said, and waved them over.

They ran towards him. Tim's confidence returned almost immediately, and he grabbed at the holdall, wanting to be the first to open it.

THE MAN replaced the receiver and left the call-box. He slid into the passenger seat of the blue Fiat. The driver was lighting another cigarette, and the man pointedly wound down the window. "You don't mind me smoking, do ya?" asked the driver.

The man shrugged but didn't say anything. He motioned with his finger for the driver to move off. As the driver's hand reached for the gear-stick, they heard a dull thudding sound off in the distance. The two men knew immediately what the noise was. They were both Belfast-born and bred and were no strangers to the sound of exploding bombs.

"Jesus fucking Christ," said the man.

The cigarette dropped from the driver's lips. He fumbled for it as it rolled between his legs, cursing loudly.

The man stared out of the open window, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. Something had gone wrong. Something had gone very, very wrong.

TEN YEARS LATER

IT HAD been a long and uncomfortable flight and Egan rubbed his knuckles into the small of his back as he waited for his luggage to appear on the carousel. The men from Beijing had booked him a first-class ticket, but Egan hadn't used it. People were noticed in first class, and Egan had gone through most of his life without being noticed. That was the way he wanted it. His features could best be described as nondescript. He was in his early thirties, a little below average height with receding hair, cropped short. He had pale blue eyes and a squarish face with thin lips that formed an almost straight line unless he smiled. The only distinguishing features Egan had were concealed by his dark blue suit. There was a thick scar that ran from the base of his neck to just above his left breast, a phosphorus burn on his right thigh, and two old bullet wounds in his right shoulder. Anyone who saw Egan naked would never forget the man, but most people would have difficulty describing him an hour after meeting him.

Egan's suitcase was as bland as he was. A grey Samsonite with an Air France tag. He picked it up and walked through Customs. Egan had started his journey in London but had taken the Eurostar train to Paris and flown out of Charles de Gaulle airport. The flight to Hong Kong had taken a little under twelve hours and he'd spent most of the time reading *A Tale of Two Cities*. He

was working his way through the complete works of Charles Dickens and hoped to have finished by the end of the year.

As he walked out into the arrivals area he saw a liveried chauffeur holding a piece of white card with 'Mr Egan' written on it. Egan shuddered. He knew that his employers were trying to impress him, and that face was all-important to the Chinese, but Egan had no wish to be impressed. He considered ignoring the chauffeur, but decided not to in case the man had him paged. Egan wasn't his real name, but he still didn't want it broadcast throughout Chek Lap Kok airport. He went over to the chauffeur and nodded.

The chauffeur touched the brim of his cap in an attempt at a salute and reached for Egan's suitcase. Egan let him carry the case. It contained nothing of importance it was as much a prop as the suit he was wearing, to give him the appearance of a businessman or banker or any of the other vultures who were flocking into Hong Kong to take advantage of the economic crisis that was wreaking havoc in South-East Asia.

The chauffeur was in his sixties and bow-legged, and he was breathing heavily by the time they reached the top-of-the-range Mercedes outside the airport terminal. Egan climbed into the plush interior and settled back for the ride to Hong Kong Island. It was his third visit to the former British colony in six months, and he was as impressed as always by the sheer magnitude of the new airport and its transport system, ferrying thousands of passengers an hour from the outlying island to Hong Kong proper by road, rail and helicopter. It didn't have the character or the white-knuckle approach of the old airport at Kai Tak, but it was considerably more efficient, and if there was one thing Egan admired, it was efficiency.

There was a copy of the *Hong Kong Standard* in the seat pocket and Egan read the business section. The stock market was continuing its downward plunge and the Hang Seng Index was down more than thirty per cent year on year. There were rumours that the government was considering devaluing the Hong Kong dollar, and inflation was climbing. Egan smiled to himself as he scanned the list of stock prices. The days of the so-called Asian miracle were long gone.

The Mercedes drew up in front of the Mandarin Hotel and a red-liveried bell-boy carried Egan's case inside. Egan checked in, showered and put on a clean shirt, then watched CNN until it was time for his meeting.

The men from Beijing had booked a room large enough to hold fifty, even though there were just four of them. It was face, Egan knew, something the Chinese regarded as one of their cultural strengths but which Egan knew was a major weakness. They were already in the room when Egan arrived, sitting in a line at one end of a long apple-wood table. There was only one other chair, at the opposite end, and Egan sat down and studied the men facing him. Three were in their seventies, with watery eyes and lined parchment-like faces. The fourth was middle-aged, in his late forties, and was the only one wearing glasses. His name was Deng, and he was a distant relative of the former Chinese leader, the one they still called the Butcher of Tiananmen Square. The other three had never been introduced to Egan, but he had made enquiries and knew who they were and how much they were worth. One was a general in the People's Liberation Army,

the other two were bankers. In the United States they'd be well past retirement age and would be enjoying their twilight years on the golf course, but careers were handled differently in China.

"Good to see you again, Mr Egan," said Deng. He spoke with an American accent, the result of three years studying for a master's degree at Harvard University.

Egan nodded but said nothing.

"Everything is proceeding satisfactorily?"

"It is."

Deng's three companions stared at Egan with unblinking eyes. The PLA general's mouth was open and Egan could hear every breath the man took. According to Egan's file on the man, he was suffering from emphysema and was a regular visitor to a lung specialist in London's Harley Street.

Egan leaned forward and interlinked his thick fingers on the table's surface. "The teams are now in place we're in a position to move to the next stage. But before we do proceed, I want to make quite sure you realise the ramifications of what you're asking."

"What we're paying for," said Deng.

Egan nodded, acknowledging the point. The four men in front of him had already transferred half a million dollars to his bank account in Zurich, and following today's meeting a further one million would be paid. If everything went to plan, Egan stood to receive a total of seven million dollars.

"Nairobi, 1998. More than two hundred dead, five and a half thousand injured. What I'm organising what you're paying for is bigger, much bigger, than what I did in Kenya. Timing is the key. It can be done late at night and casualties will be minimal. It can be done at lunch-time and they'll be digging the bodies out for weeks."

Deng nodded, but the other three men remained impassive. Egan knew that at least one of the geriatrics spoke fluent English and that the other two had a reasonable grasp of the language.

"I have no qualms either way," Egan continued, "but I want to make it clear before we go any further that if you do decide to go ahead with a daytime event, hundreds of office workers could die."

Deng nodded again. He turned to his three companions and spoke in rapid Mandarin. All three men nodded. "We have no problems with matters as they stand, Mr Egan. If anything, it adds credibility to our scenario, does it not?"

"It could be taken either way," said Egan. "I was thinking in terms of the degree of backlash. Africans are one thing, Europeans are something else."

"Nevertheless," said Deng, "we are of the opinion that we should proceed as planned."

"No problem," said Egan. "As soon as the next tranche is deposited in Zurich, we'll move on to the next stage."

The PLA general wheezed and then leaned over to Deng and whispered to him in Mandarin. Deng listened, pushing his spectacles higher up his nose. When the general had finished whispering, Deng nodded and then looked at Egan. "Time is still of the essence, Mr Egan. Do we have your assurance that everything will be completed on time?"

“You do,” said Egan. He was well aware of how anxious the men from Beijing were that his mission be completed without delay. He knew that their lives would be forfeit if he failed.

“The money will be in your account within the hour,” said Deng.

THERE WERE two of them, stocky men wearing matching blue track suits, black Reebok trainers and black ski masks. They vaulted over the back wall and ran, bent double, along the grass to the kitchen door of the house. They crouched at the door for several seconds, then one of the men nodded and reached for the door handle. It opened. They weren’t surprised. They’d been watching the house for two weeks and they knew the routine of the occupants. The kitchen door was never locked until the family’s golden retriever had been allowed out just after midnight.

The men slipped into the kitchen and gently closed the door behind them. They stood for a while, listening. They could just about hear the television in the sitting room. A comedy programme. Loud studio laughter. They reached into their track-suit tops and pulled out guns. Black automatics with bulbous silencers. The men didn’t expect to have to use them. But they were prepared, if necessary.

Their biggest worry was the dog. People could be threatened, people knew the damage that guns could do, but dogs would just growl and bark, maybe even attack to protect what they considered to be their territory. The dog was in the sitting room, so if they moved carefully they wouldn’t be heard.

One of them eased open the door to the hallway. More studio laughter. They moved on the balls of their feet, hardly breathing as they crept to the stairs. The stairs would be the dangerous part. Stairs creaked. They went up two stairs at a time, keeping close to the wall, guns at the ready.

They froze as they heard a police siren, but then relaxed as they realised it was on the television. Somebody had changed channels. They heard a roar. A football match, maybe. Then muffled voices. Then studio laughter again. The men moved along the upper hallway and knelt down at the door to the back bedroom. One of the men was wearing a small rucksack, and he slipped it off and placed it on the carpet. From the rucksack he pulled out a cloth and a small glass bottle containing a colourless liquid, turning his head to avoid the worst of the fumes. When the cloth was soaked, he nodded at his companion, who opened the door and stepped inside.

They moved quickly through the darkness to the bed. A small girl was asleep, her blond hair spread across the pillow, a cuddly Garfield toy clutched to her chest. The man with the cloth held it tightly against the girl’s face. She stopped struggling after a few seconds, but he kept the cloth pressed over her mouth and nose for a full minute before releasing his grip on her.

The other man put a white envelope on a bedside table and gathered up the little girl. The Garfield toy slipped on to the floor. The man who’d drugged the girl picked up the cuddly toy, hesitated for a second, and then put it and several other toys into his rucksack. The man holding the unconscious girl made an impatient clicking noise. Even with most of his face covered by the ski mask, it was clear he was glaring at his companion. He nodded at the door.

The two men moved down the stairs as silently as they'd gone up, and two minutes later they were in a Ford Mondeo, driving south with the little girl hidden under a tartan blanket. The chloroform would keep her unconscious for the best part of thirty minutes, and they didn't have far to go.

* * *

Thriller writer and former SAS trooper Andy McNab says that my book *The Chinaman* is one of his top five favourite thrillers. It's about a former Viet Cong fighter who switches sides during the Vietnam War but gets left behind by the Americans. Quiet, hard-working and unassuming, he was building up his South London take-away business. Until the day his wife and youngest daughter were destroyed by an IRA bomb in a Knightsbridge department store. Then, simply but persistently, he began to ask the authorities who were the men responsible, what was being done. And was turned away, fobbed off, treated as a nuisance. They called him the Chinaman and refused to help. Which was when the Chinaman, denied justice, decided on revenge. And went back to war. In some ways it's a prequel to *The Bombmaker*. Here are the first few chapters -

* * *

THE CHINAMAN

THEY MADE AN ODD COUPLE as they walked together through the store, the girl and the old woman. The girl was beautiful, quite, quite beautiful. Her sleek black hair hung dead straight down to the middle of her back and it rippled like an oily tide as she wandered through the racks of dresses and blouses. She was tall and slim and wore tight green cord trousers and cowboy boots and a brown leather bomber jacket with the collar turned up. She moved like a model, smoothly and controlled, as if used to being watched. The men that followed her with their eyes had no way of knowing where she came from other than that she was Oriental. She could have been Thai or Chinese or Korean but whatever she was, she was beautiful and that was all they cared about. Her cheekbones were high and well defined and her skin was the colour of milky tea and her eyes were wide and oval and she had a mouth that seemed to be in a perpetual pout. Every now and then something would catch her eye and she would take a dress or a blouse off its rack and hold it up and then shrug, not satisfied, before replacing it. Her hands were long and elegant and the nails were carefully painted with deep red varnish.

By the girl's side walked a gnarled old woman, a head shorter and an age older. Her face was wrinkled and pock-marked like chamois leather that had been left for too long in the sun. Her hair was grey and dull and cropped close to her head and her eyes were blank and uninterested in what was going on around her. When the girl asked her opinion on an item of clothing she would barely look at it before shaking her head and then she'd drop her gaze and concentrate on the

floor. She wore a thick cloth coat and a faded scarf and she kept her hands thrust into her pockets despite the warmth of the store.

It was a Saturday in January and the weather outside was bitterly cold, piles of dirty slush squashed up against the kerb and wisps of white vapour feathering from the mouths of passers-by. The girl looked over the top of a rack of imitation fur coats topped with a sign that promised thirty per cent off, and through the streaked window. She shivered and didn't know why. She'd lived in London for as long as she could remember, and unlike her mother, she was well used to the British climate. It was as if someone had walked over her grave, or the grave of her ancestors.

She took one of the coats and held it against herself. A middle-aged man in a fawn trench coat waiting outside the changing rooms with a carrier bag full of packages looked at her and smiled and nodded his approval. She ignored him and studied the coat. The old woman snorted and walked off. The girl looked at the price tag but even with the sale discount she realised she couldn't afford it.

She looked through the large glass window again at the bustling crowds fighting to get into the department store across the road. She wanted to join them and go hunting for bargains but she could see that the old woman was tired and impatient to go home and they had an hour's travelling ahead of them. She put the coat back on the rack.

A large black and red motorcycle threaded its way through the traffic and parked on the double yellow lines in front of the main entrance to the store. It was brand new and gleaming apart from the tyres which were crusted with ice. On the back carrier box was the name of a courier firm. She watched the rider dismount like a cowboy getting off a horse. He was dressed in black leather with a white wrap-around helmet and a tinted visor. There was a walkie-talkie in a leather case hanging from a belt around his waist and a black receiver clipped to his left shoulder. The rider switched on his hazard warning lights and the amber flashing was reflected on the wet road. He looked up and down the pavement as if checking for traffic wardens and then turned his back on the bike and crossed the road towards the boutique. He stepped to one side to let a trio of giggling schoolgirls leave the shop and then came in. As he passed the girl he looked at her, up and down, and she turned to watch him go, his leathers squeaking with every step. The rider was empty handed so the girl assumed he was there to collect something, but he continued to move through the shoppers, passed the pay counter and then he pushed open the doors at the other side of the shop and went out into the street. The girl frowned and turned back to the window. The bike's lights were still flashing. Her frown deepened and at that moment the twenty-five pounds of Semtex explosive in the back carrier box exploded in a flash of blinding white light, blowing in the window and striking her with thousands of glass daggers. At the last moment she tried to turn towards her mother, to shield her, but they died together in the hail of glass.

THE PRESS ASSOCIATION news desk received the call as the first ambulance arrived at the department store, blue light flashing and siren whining. The reporter who took the call later told the police that the voice was Irish and had given a codeword that the police identified as genuine; the tip-off was not a hoax. The voice was that of a man, he couldn't tell if he was young or old,

and the caller said that a bomb had just gone off in Knightsbridge and that the Provisional Irish Republican Army claimed responsibility for it. The reporter hadn't recorded the call, he was new on the job and no one had told him that he was supposed to. The line went dead and he took his notebook over to the news editor who told him to check with the police that there had indeed been an explosion and three minutes later the story went out over the wires as a flash IRA BOMB EXPLODES OUTSIDE LONDON STORE AT LEAST FIVE DEAD.

By the time it appeared on the screen of the news editor of the *Sunday World* he'd already had a phone call from a member of the public keen to earn a tip-off fee. He'd assigned two reporters to start phoning the police and their Sinn Fein contacts and was trying to track down their Belfast stringers.

It was 5.30pm., the crossing over point when the day shift began to drift off to the pub and the night reporters were arriving. The picture desk had sent two freelances and a staffer to the scene, but Knightsbridge was at least half an hour's drive away from the paper's Docklands offices.

More information was trickling over the wires on PA and Reuters and the death toll kept climbing with each snatch of copy.

"Jesus, now they're saying twelve dead," said Jon Simpson, the news editor. Behind him stood the chief sub and the editor, reading over his shoulder.

"Splash?" said the chief sub, knowing the answer would be yes. The front page lead at the afternoon conference had been a sixties pop star's drug problem.

"We'll have to pull our fingers out if we're going to make the first edition," said the editor. "We'll take the whole of page one, two and three, let me see the pics first. Hold the MP story until next week and hack back the food safety feature. Hang on, no, drop it altogether. And we'll save the splash until next week as well, it's exclusive." The chief sub scurried back to his terminal to redraw his page plans, shouting to the picture editor to send over everything he had.

"You've got two hours until the first edition, Jon. Get everybody on it." The editor wandered over to the picture desk while Simpson picked up the phone.

"Where's Woody?" Simpson yelled at his deputy who was busy scrolling through the PA wire.

"Where do you think?" he shouted back, raising his eyebrows.

"Drunken pig," said Simpson and rang the King's Head, a short stagger away from the office.

As the phone trilled behind the bar, Ian Wood was downing his second double Bells and trying to look down the front of the barmaid's blouse. She saw what he was up to and flicked her towel at him and laughed. "Don't let Sandy catch you doing that," she scolded and he grinned.

"Your husband's too good a guv'nor to go slapping the customers around," he said, finishing his whisky.

"Another?" she said as she picked up the phone. She listened and then mouthed silently "Are you in?"

"Who's asking?" he mouthed back.

"The office," she replied, and he realised they looked like a couple of goldfish gasping for breath. He nodded and took the phone off her. She picked his glass up and refilled it.

“Woody, are you on for a double shift?” asked Simpson.

Woody looked at the double measure of whisky in his glass and licked his lips but hesitated for only a second before he told Simpson he’d do it. Woody was a freelance and he needed money. If he’d been staff he’d have told the news editor where to get off, but it had been a long time since anyone had given Ian Wood a staff job.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“IRA bomb. A big one. Knightsbridge.”

“Christ. How many dead?”

“They’re saying twelve now, no make that thirteen, but they’re still counting. Get out there and get the colour. Link up with the monkeys while you’re there, they’ll need their captions written.” Woody heard Simpson call out for the names of photographers. “Dave Wilkins is the staffer, find him,” he said.

“I’m on my way,” said Woody and hung up.

He took the glass off the bar and swallowed it down in one.

“You off, Woody?” said the barmaid, surprised.

“Duty calls, darling,” he said. “Can you cash me a cheque?”

“Fifty?” she asked.

“Fifty is magic. You’re a life-saver. If ever that husband of yours...”

She waved him away and counted out the notes as Woody handed over the cheque.

“See you later,” he said, and walked down the dimly lit corridor and out of the pub door into the street. He turned right and walked the short distance to The Highway and hailed a cab heading towards the City.

The driver looked over his shoulder when Woody told him where he wanted to go. “We’ll never get near the place, mate,” he said. “There’s a bomb gone off.”

“Yeah I know,” said Woody. “I’m a reporter.”

“OK,” said the cabbie and sped off down the road. “Which paper d’yer work for then?”

“*Sunday World*,” replied Woody.

“Yeah?” said the cabbie. “What happened? Page Three girl killed was she?” His deep-throated laughter echoed around the cab.

They hit unmoving traffic long before they reached Knightsbridge and though the cabbie tried to find a way through the side-streets they were soon helplessly locked in.

“Best I can do,” said the driver apologetically, his professional pride wounded.

“No sweat,” said Woody, getting out. He handed a ten-pound note through the window. “I’ll walk from here. Call it a tenner and give me a receipt, please.”

“Clamping down on expenses, are they?”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

The cabbie signed a receipt and handed it to Woody. Then as an afterthought he ripped off a few blank receipts from his pad. “Here,” he said, “fill these in yourself.”

“You’re a prince,” said Woody, and put them gratefully into his raincoat pocket.

He began to jog slowly towards the sound of sirens, his feet slapping on the wet pavement and his raincoat flapping behind him. Despite the cold he soon worked up a sweat. Ian Wood was not a fit man. He was slightly overweight but that wasn't the problem, he was out of condition because he never took any exercise, hadn't since his schooldays.

The police had cordoned off the area around the store and a burly sergeant blocked his way when he tried to duck under the barrier. He fished out his yellow plastic Metropolitan Police Press card and after the copper had scrutinised it he was waved through.

It was a scene from hell. Wrecked cars were strewn across the road, still smoking and hissing. There was an assortment of emergency vehicles, all with their doors open, radios crackling and lights flashing. There were two fire engines though their hoses were still in place, unused. There had obviously been a number of small fires burning but the firemen had used extinguishers to put them out. There were half a dozen ambulances, and as Woody walked towards the police top brass one of them pulled away and its siren kicked into life. Something squelched under Woody's shoe and he looked down. He was standing on a hand. It was a small girl's hand, the skin white and unlined, the nails bitten to the quick. The hand was attached to a forearm but that was all, it ended in a ragged, bloody mess at the point where there should have been an elbow. Woody's stomach heaved and he pulled his foot away with a jerk, a look of horror on his face.

He backed away and bumped into a policeman wearing dark-blue overalls, black Wellington boots and thick, rubber gloves that covered most of his arms. The policeman picked up the dismembered arm and dropped it into a plastic bag he was carrying. As he straightened up, Woody saw that the man's face was covered with a white surgical mask and then he saw the blonde wavy hair and realised it wasn't a man at all, but a woman in her twenties. There were tears streaming down her face. She turned away from him, walked a few steps and bent down again. This time she picked up a shoe with a shattered bone sticking out of a green sock. Woody shuddered. There were dozens of policemen dressed in the same overalls and following the girl's grisly example. Woody realised with a jolt why the body count hadn't been finalised. It was at least an hour since the bomb had gone off and they were still picking up the pieces. Ambulancemen were ferrying bodies on stretchers at the run, some of the victims moaning or screaming, others still, their faces covered with blankets. The policemen in their blood-spotted overalls worked at a slower pace, knowing that it was more important to be thorough than fast. They were not in the business of saving lives, simply collecting evidence.

Woody looked around, surveying the damage. All the windows of the store had been blown in, as had those in the shops opposite, and the stonework was pitted and blackened. Lying half on and half off the pavement was the twisted frame of a motorcycle, the back a mass of scorched and melted metal. It was being examined by two middle-aged men in white overalls.

Shocked shoppers and staff were still filing out of the store, urged on by uniformed constables in yellow reflective jackets, as an inspector shouted through a megaphone that there could be another bomb in the vicinity and would the crowds please keep back. Woody knew that he was just saying that to keep the ghouls away. Two bombs would have meant double the risk for the bombers planting the devices, and the IRA never bothered using two devices against civilian

targets, only against security forces in Northern Ireland. Besides, if there was any chance of a second device they'd keep the ambulancemen back while the Bomb Disposal Squad gave the place a thorough going over.

There were a handful of sniffer dogs and their handlers checking the street, and Woody could see more dogs inside the store, noses down and tails wagging, happy to be working. One of the dogs in the street, a long-haired Retriever, lunged forward and seized something in its jaws. Its handler yelled and kicked its flanks and the dog dropped whatever it had been holding. It was an arm. The handler yanked his dog away, cursing. The dog cowered, all the time keeping its eyes on the prize.

Woody went over to the Chief Superintendent and two inspectors who were surrounded by a pack of reporters and photographers. He recognised many of the faces and he knew that all the tabloids and heavies would be represented. If not, some news editor would be getting his backside soundly kicked. The older hacks were taking shorthand notes in small notebooks while the younger ones thrust mini tape-recorders in front of the police. Behind the pack were two television crews trying in vain to get a clear shot. He heard the click-whirr of a motor-drive and he turned to see Dave Wilkins aiming his Nikon at a torso lying in the gutter.

"They won't use it," Woody told him. "Too gory."

"So?" said the photographer.

Woody listened to the Chief Superintendent explaining what he thought had happened. A bomb in the back of a motorcycle, no warning, the streets crowded and the stores packed. No idea yet how many had been killed. Fifteen at least. Yes, almost certainly linked to the recent wave of London bombings, four so far. Correction, five including this one. Yes, the IRA had claimed responsibility.

"And that, gentlemen," he said with the wave of a gloved hand, "is all that I can tell you right now. Would you please all move back behind the barriers and let my men get on with their work. We'll be having a full press conference at the Yard later tonight." He politely pushed his way through the journalists, and they moved aside to let him go, knowing that the officer had said all he was going to say. There was no point in antagonising him. Besides, they all had their own police contacts who would be a hell of a lot more forthcoming.

Woody went over to the shops facing the department store, noting down the names on the signs. His feet crunched on broken glass and he stepped to one side to let two ambulancemen with a stretcher out of a boutique. They were carrying a girl, her leather jacket and green cords shredded and ripped and dripping with blood. He knew she was a girl because of her long black hair. There was nothing left of her face, just strips of flesh hanging off white bone. Woody felt his stomach heave again. He'd been at accident scenes before, far too many to remember, but he'd never seen such carnage. The area reeked of death, of blood and burning and scorched meat. He fought to keep his emotions under control, knowing that he had work to do. It was harder for the reporters he thought bitterly. The monkeys had it easy. They looked at everything through the camera lens and that insulated them from the reality of it. But reporters had to be there and

experience it before they could write about it, they had to open themselves to the horror, the grief and the pain. Sometimes it was almost too much to bear. Almost.

He stood by one of the ambulances and got some snatched quotes from a couple of harassed stretcher-bearers and then he followed a woman in a fur coat that he'd seen leaving the store, ducked under the barrier and caught up with her. Her eyewitness account was harrowing and she had no qualms about giving her name and address. Her eyes were glassy and Woody knew she was in a state of shock and he held her arm gently as he spoke to her and then gestured over at Wilkins, standing to one side so that he could get a head-and-shoulders shot of her.

"Got all you want?" Woody asked the photographer.

"Yeah," said Wilkins. "I'll head back and leave the freelancers to get the rest. You coming?"

"No, I'll ring the story in, it'll save time. I'll see you back there."

Woody half-heartedly looked for a call box, but knew that he stood little chance in Knightsbridge. He walked to a small Italian bistro and went inside.

"Can I use the phone?" he asked a waiter. The waiter began to protest in fractured English so Woody took out his wallet and gave him ten pounds. The protests evaporated and he was soon through to the office and dictating to a copytaker straight from his notebook. Twenty-five paragraphs, and he knew it was good stuff. When he'd finished he asked the copytaker to transfer him to the news desk and he checked that everything was OK with Simpson.

"Got it here, Woody," he said. "Great read."

"OK, I'm going back to see what else I can get. I'll call you." He hung up before Simpson could order him back to base. On the way out he got a receipt from the waiter.

There was a pub down the road and Woody gratefully walked up to the bar and ordered a double Bells. It was only when the whisky slopped around the tumbler that he realised how badly his hands were shaking.

THE INTERCOM buzzed, catching them all by surprise, even though they were waiting for him. There were three of them in the flat, drinking tea and watching television. They were casually dressed baggy pullovers, faded jeans and grubby training shoes and looked like sociology students stuck with nothing to do between lectures. One of the men was smoking and on the floor beside his easy chair was a circular crystal ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts. He leant over and stubbed out the one in his hand, pushed himself up and walked into the hall. On the wall by the door was a telephone with a small black and white television screen; he pressed a square plastic button and it flickered into life.

"Welcome back," he said to the figure waiting down below and pressed a second button, the one that opened the entrance door four floors below. As he waited for him to come up in the lift he went back into the lounge. "It's him," he said, but they knew it would be because no one else knew they were there and if they did they wouldn't be coming in through the front door but through the window with stun grenades and machine guns.

There was an American comedy show on the television and canned laughter filled the room. Through the floor-to-ceiling sliding windows at the end of the lounge the man saw a tug struggle along the Thames, hauling an ungainly barge behind it.

He went back into the hall and opened the door as the lift jolted to a halt. The man who stepped out of the lift was in his early twenties, wearing grey flannel trousers and a blue blazer over a white polo neck sweater. He had dark-brown curly hair and black eyes and was grinning widely. "Did you see it?" he asked eagerly, before the other man even had a chance to close the door. He punched the air with his fist. "Did you bloody well see it?"

"Calm down, O'Reilly," said the man who'd let him in.

O'Reilly turned towards him, his cheeks flaring red. "Calm down?" he said. "Christ, man, you should have been there. You should have seen me. It was fan-bloody-tastic." He turned back to look at the television set. "Has it been on yet? How many did we get?"

"Fifteen so far," said the man sitting on the leather Chesterfield directly opposite the pseudo-antique video cabinet on which the television stood. "You did well, O'Reilly." He was the oldest of the group but even he had barely turned thirty. Although he had the broadest Irish accent he had Nordic blond hair and piercing blue eyes and fair skin. His name was also far removed from his Irish origins but Denis Fisher was Belfast-born and he'd killed many times for the Cause. "What about the helmet and the leathers?" he asked O'Reilly.

"In the boot of the car. Just like you said. It was so easy."

"Not easy," said Fisher. "Well planned."

"Whatever," said O'Reilly. "I deserve a drink." He went into the white-and-blue-tiled kitchen and opened the fridge. "Anyone else want anything?" he called, but they all declined. O'Reilly took out a cold can of Carlsberg and opened it as he walked back into the lounge. He pulled one of the wooden chairs out from under the oval dining-table and sat astride it, resting his forearms on its back.

"What next?" he asked, grinning.

"Yes," said the man who'd opened the door and who was now sitting on a flowery print sofa by a tall wooden bookcase. His name was McCormick. "What do we do next?"

Fisher smiled. "You're so bloody impatient," he laughed. He turned to look at the occupant of the chair by the window, the one they called The Bombmaker. "That depends on what MacDermott here comes up with." The Bombmaker grinned.

The comedy show was interrupted for a news flash and a sombre man with movie-star looks reported that sixteen people had died in a bomb explosion and that the Provisional IRA had claimed responsibility. They then cut to a reporter in a white raincoat standing under a streetlamp in Knightsbridge, who said that police now believed that the bomb had been in the back carrier of a motorcycle and that it had been detonated by a timing device.

O'Reilly punched the air again, and The Bombmaker's grin widened.

* * *

The Long shot. The plan is so complex, the target so well protected that the three snipers have to rehearse the killing in the seclusion of the Arizona desert. Cole Howard of the FBI knows he has only days to prevent the audacious assassination. But he doesn't know who the target is. Or where the crack marksmen will strike. Former SAS sergeant Mike Cramer is also on the trail, infiltrating the Irish community in New York as he tracks down Mary Hennessy, the ruthless killer who tore his life apart. Cramer appears at the end of my book *The Chinaman*, but this is the first book where he takes centre stage. Unless Cramer and Howard agree to co-operate, the world will witness the most spectacular terrorist coup of all time . . . Here are the first few chapters –

THE LONG SHOT

THE TYRES of the Boeing 737 bit into the runway, squealing like dying pigs and sending spurts of dust into the air. The plane taxied towards the terminal building which shimmered in the midday heat. In the First Class cabin the passengers began to unbuckle their seat belts before the plane had come to a halt. A dark-haired stewardess left her seat and went over to the occupant of seat 3B. She bent down and gave him her professional smile. “Mr Ahmed?” she said. The man continued reading as if he hadn’t heard. “Mr Ahmed?” she repeated. He looked up and nodded. He was a typical First Class passenger: middle-aged, overweight and seemingly bored with the whole business of flying. He’d scarcely touched the inflight food and rejected the complimentary headset with an impatient wave of his hand. He’d spent most of the three-hour flight with his nose buried in the *Wall Street Journal*. “Mr Ahmed, the pilot has requested that you remain behind while the rest of the passengers deplane,” she said.

The passenger didn’t seem the least bit surprised by the request. “What about the people I’m travelling with?” he asked. The woman next to him was down on the manifest as his wife and, like the man, was travelling on a Yemeni diplomatic passport. A grey-haired older woman, apparently his mother, was sitting behind him, and on the other side of the cabin were his two young children. All had Yemeni diplomatic passports.

“I’m sorry, sir, they’re also to stay behind.”

The passenger nodded. “I understand,” he said quietly. “Will you tell my children while I explain to my mother?”

The stewardess went over to explain to the youngsters while Ahmed turned around and spoke to the old woman. Elba Maria Sanchez had grown accustomed to waiting in airliners while immigration officials took advice on whether or not her son should be admitted into their country. The family had been turned away from most of the countries in the Middle East, and previous safe havens including East Germany and Hungary had turned their backs on their old cohorts in their rush to embrace capitalism. Even the Sudanese had betrayed them.

The passengers shuffled off the plane. The stewardess asked Ahmed if he wanted a drink while he waited but he declined. He picked up a copy of *Newsweek* and idly flicked through it.

“It’s always the same,” said his wife bitterly. “They should be ashamed of themselves, these people, they have no loyalty. After all we’ve done for them.”

“Be patient, Magdalena,” said the man, his eyes on the magazine.

“Patient! Ha! I was patient in Tripoli, I was patient in Damascus, I’ve been patient in virtually every airport in the Middle East. Face it, Ilich, no-one wants us any more. We’re an embarrassment.”

“Hush,” he said quietly. “You’ll upset the children.”

She looked like she was about to argue but before she could speak a small, unimposing man in a dark suit appeared at the doorway. He carried a shiny black briefcase and he nervously rubbed his moustache as he approached Ahmed. He introduced himself as Khatami, just the one name, and he didn’t tell the passenger who he represented. There was no need. He suggested that they go back into the Business Class cabin where they could have some privacy and Ahmed followed him along the aisle. Ahmed’s children looked anxiously up at him and he winked at them reassuringly. Khatami stood to the side to allow Ahmed past and then he whisked the blue curtain closed. Ahmed sat down in an aisle seat and Khatami took the seat opposite him, balancing the briefcase on his knees. Khatami seemed uneasy and beads of perspiration dripped down either side of his beakish nose. “Your passport, please,” he said, holding out his hand.

Ahmed took his passport from the inside pocket of his Armani jacket and handed it over. Khatami flicked through the pages of the passport which contained a plethora of visas and immigration stamps. He read the name at the front of the passport: Nagi Abubaker Ahmed. The photograph matched the man sitting in front of him: a receding hairline, a thick moustache over fleshy lips, and jowls around the chin that suggested the man had lived a soft life with too much time spent in expensive restaurants. “You are Ilich Ramirez Sanchez?”

The passenger nodded.

“The woman travelling with you is Magdalena Kopp?”

Another curt nod.

“Mr Sanchez, I’ve been asked to put a number of questions to you before our Government decides whether or not it can accommodate your request for asylum.”

Sanchez said nothing. Khatami could see his own reflection in the darkened lenses of Sanchez’s spectacles. It gave him an uneasy feeling and he took a large white handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. “You have been living in Damascus for some time, is that correct?”

“Yes,” said Sanchez.

“From there you went where?”

“To Libya.”

“The Libyans would not allow you to stay in their country?”

“You are well informed,” said Sanchez.

“And from Libya you went back to Damascus?”

“That was the first plane out of the country, yes.”

Khatami nodded, wiped his forehead again and shoved the handkerchief back into his top pocket. "Your assets are where?"

"Assets? I don't understand."

"You have money?"

Sanchez smiled. "Yes, I have money. I was well paid for my work."

"The money is where?"

"Switzerland, mainly. I also have one million dollars in my diplomatic baggage. I can assure you I will not be a burden."

Khatami smiled nervously. "Good, good. That's good."

He looked down at his briefcase and noticed that he was gripping it so tightly that his nails were biting into the leather. He took his hands away and Sanchez saw two wet palm prints where they had been. "My Government is particularly concerned about your past, Mr Sanchez. Your, how shall I call them? . . . exploits . . . have been well documented, and have attracted a great deal of publicity. They want to know whether or not you have rescinded your terrorist past."

Sanchez sighed. "I am looking only for a place where my family and I can live in safety. My past is my past."

Khatami nodded, keeping his eyes down so that he wouldn't have to look at his own reflection. "Then you no longer consider yourself a terrorist?"

"That is correct," said Sanchez.

"Ah," said Khatami. "That is a great pity. A great pity." He lifted his head and there was a look of hawkish intensity in his eyes. "It could well be in the future that we would have need of someone with your talents."

"I see," said Sanchez. He took off his spectacles, revealing brown eyes that were surprisingly soft and amused. "I would not have a problem with that. I think that whoever offers me sanctuary would have the right to expect me to perform a service for them."

Khatami grinned and nodded. He had expected the discussion with Ilrich Ramirez Sanchez to be much more stressful. The man the world new as Carlos the Jackal was proving surprisingly easy to deal with.

JIM MITCHELL scanned the clear blue skies through the cockpit of his Cessna 172. It was a glorious day for flying. There were a few wisps of feathery clouds but they were way up high, much higher than the single-engine Cessna could ever hope to fly. To the north-west, about eight miles away, he saw the runway, almost perpendicular to the nose of the Cessna. The plane was perfectly trimmed and there was next to no turbulence so he needed only the barest pressure on the wheel to maintain his course. He turned his head to the right and caught his wife's eye. She smiled and winked at him and he grinned back. "Sandra, do you want to call them?"

"Sure," she said. She tuned the radio to the control tower. Mitchell watched her as she contacted the air-traffic controller, reported their position and told him that they were inbound for landing. She asked for a runway advisory and, through his headset, Mitchell heard the controller tell her that the wind was blowing right down the runway at about six knots. Perfect. At forty-five

years old, Jim Mitchell was a decade and a half older than his wife and he never tired of looking at her. She smiled as she spoke into the microphone and she waved for him to keep his eyes on the outside of the plane. He glanced down at the sectional chart clipped to his leg. Their approach was taking them through a Military Operations Area, marked on the chart with a magenta border. Flying was permitted in the MOA, but it still made him slightly nervous. He peered through the windshield, scanning the sky in segments, looking for military traffic.

He felt a small hand on his shoulder. "Dad, Dad, turn around."

Mitchell twisted around to see his son Jamie holding their camcorder. The red light was on showing that Jamie was filming. Mitchell grinned and gave his son a thumbs-up. "Jim Mitchell, the fearless pilot," he laughed and Jamie giggled. The boy panned to the right. "Mon," he said, and Sandra looked over her shoulder.

"Don't use all the tape," she chided. "Save it till we get closer to Vegas."

"Oh Mom, don't say stuff like that, it gets recorded," Jamie moaned. He switched the camcorder off. "Now I'll have to rewind it." He sighed in the way that only a child can sigh and pouted. "I bet Scorsese never had this trouble," he said.

Sandra leaned back and ruffled his hair. He jerked away, refusing to be mollified. At eight years old he was getting to the 'I don't want to be touched' stage, Sandra realised with a twinge of regret.

"I see the wind-sock," said Sandra, and Mitchell squinted, looking for the orange sock which would give him an accurate indication of the ground-level wind direction. He couldn't see it. His wife's eyesight was much better than Mitchell's, who was no longer allowed to fly without his correcting lenses. Another sign of old age creeping up on him, he thought ruefully. Mitchell reduced power and took the Cessna down to one thousand feet above the ground and joined the traffic pattern at the single runway. They were the only plane in the area and they were soon on the ground, taxiing up to a refuelling station.

Jamie filmed the plane being refuelled and then wandered off to get a canned drink from a vending machine. Mitchell put his hands on his hips and surveyed the sky overhead.

Jamie returned with his Coke. He took the camcorder out of the Cessna. "Okay, I want a shot of the two of you together at the front of the plane," said the boy, and he showed his parents where he wanted them to stand.

"Our son, the movie director," said Mitchell.

"It'll be a great loss to the real estate industry that he doesn't follow in his father's footsteps," said Sandra, smiling to show that she was joking. Real estate had given them an enviable lifestyle, even if Mitchell had to admit that it wasn't the most exciting of careers and that people tended to avoid him at parties. She stood close to him and he slipped his arm around her waist. Mitchell held his head high to conceal his growing bald spot and double chin from the camcorder, and sucked in his stomach.

Jamie panned across from the fuel pumps until his parents were in the centre of the viewfinder. They waved and grinned. He switched the camcorder off and climbed into the back seat of the Cessna while his father walked around the plane and checked the fuel tanks. Sandra

told her son to put on a pullover. The weather in Phoenix had been unseasonably warm but the forecast had been for cold winds to the north.

Mitchell soon had the small plane up in the air. He headed west, his VOR tuned to the Needles beacon in Havasu Lake National Wildlife Refuge from where he planned to fly up to Vegas. There was little in the way of landmarks to navigate by once he'd flown over Highway 93, so he had to rely on his VOR. He would have preferred to fly at a slightly higher altitude, but Jamie kept insisting that they fly low so that he could look at the scenery, even if it was just sand, rocks and the many-armed cacti which stood like guardsmen on parade.

"Hey, Dad, what's that down there?" Jamie pointed down to the left.

Mitchell turned to look where his son was pointing but couldn't see anything. "What is it, Jamie?" he asked.

"There's someone down there. Cars in the desert, and some other stuff. Can we look?"

Mitchell squinted behind his sunglasses. The darkened lenses were prescription but lately he was finding they weren't as good at correcting his long-distance vision as they used to be. He checked his fuel gauges and saw that he had plenty to spare. With the VOR equipment there was no chance of getting lost, and it was supposed to be a vacation. "I guess so, son," he said, and put the Cessna into a slow, turning descent.

"Is this a good idea?" Sandra asked through his headset.

"We've plenty of time," said Mitchell. "And we're on a VFR flight plan, we can play around if we want."

"There!" Jamie shouted. "I think they're making a movie." He switched his camcorder on and began filming out of the side window.

"What is it?" asked Sandra. She was sitting on the right-hand side of the plane and her husband was blocking her view.

"I can't see," said Mitchell, putting the Cessna into a steep turn so that the ground whirled underneath him. The altimeter span as he took the plane down to two thousand feet.

"There are two towers down there, the sort they put cameras on," said Jamie excitedly. "I can't see what they're doing, though. I bet they're making a movie. This is cool. I wonder who the director is?"

Mitchell peered out of the cockpit. Far below he could see a wood and metal structure, about fifty feet high. It looked like scaffolding, and he could make out a figure on top of it. Chains or ropes tethered the structure to the ground. About half a mile away were a group of men standing on the ground in a line. Mitchell frowned. The figures were standing too still, and there was something awkward about the way they held their arms. They weren't cacti, but they weren't human, either. He levelled the plane off and pointed out the figures to his wife.

"They look like robots," she said.

"Or dummies, he agreed."

"There are real people over there, see?" She pointed to another group of figures standing several hundred feet away.

"I see them," said Mitchell.

“Let’s go down lower, Dad,” said Jamie, still filming. “It might be someone famous.”

“That might not be a good idea, Jamie,” said his mother, twisting around in her seat. “They might not want a plane buzzing overhead.”

“Just one pass, Mom,” implored Jamie. “Please.”

“Jim, what do you think?” she asked her husband.

“One quick look wouldn’t hurt,” said Mitchell. “I must admit I’m a bit curious myself. They’re miles from anywhere.”

“Looks like I’m outvoted then,” said Sandra.

Mitchell circled slowly as he lost height and levelled off at five hundred feet above the ground, several miles away from the two towers. Jamie trained the camcorder on the desert below. They flew around an isolated butte which rose majestically from the ground as if it had been pushed up from below. Jamie took the viewfinder away from his face and peered at the rocky outcrop. “There’s someone on top of the hill,” he said. He put the camcorder back to his eye and zoomed in on the butte. “He’s lying down . . . I think he’s got a gun, Dad.”

“Are you sure?”

The Cessna had flown by the hill and Jamie couldn’t see the man any more. “I don’t know, I think so.”

“There wouldn’t be hunters out here, surely,” said Sandra, the concern obvious in her voice.

“Nothing to shoot at except lizards,” said Mitchell.

“Okay, Jamie, keep your eyes open, we’re only going to do this once. Shout if you see Steven Spielberg, okay?” He cut back on the power and slowed the Cessna’s airspeed until they were at eighty knots. Jamie panned across the activity below, zooming in on the three people on the ground and then tracking across to the two towers. Sandra shaded her eyes with her hands and peered down.

“Jamie, can you see what the men are doing on the towers?” she said. “They’re not cameras they’re holding, are they?”

Jamie concentrated his camcorder on the tower closest to the small plane. It was about half a mile away and seemed to be made of metal scaffolding and planks. “No, Mom,” he said, “they’re guns.”

“Guns?”

“Yeah, like the guy had back on the hill.”

Sandra turned to her husband. “Jim, I don’t like this, let’s go.”

“You think maybe we should report it?” Mitchell asked.

“I don’t know, I just think we should go. I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Okay, honey, no problem.” Mitchell pushed the throttle full in and pulled back on the control wheel and aimed the small plane up into the blue sky. He looked at his VOR and saw that he was to the left of his original course so he banked the Cessna to the right as he climbed. The desert scrub seemed to slide below him.

Sandra settled back in her seat, glad to be away from the men with the guns. She closed her eyes and rubbed them with the back of her hands. She heard the crack of splintering glass and she

jumped as something wet splattered across her cheek. Her stomach lurched as the nose of the Cessna dipped down and when she looked across at her husband she saw that he'd slumped back in his seat, his head resting against the side window. Her first thought was that he'd had a heart attack or a stroke but then she saw that there was blood on his face and she screamed. His blood was all over her and there were bits of pink tissue and fragments of bone that looked like white wood shavings. She screamed and tugged on his shoulder, hoping that by shaking him she'd wake him up. His head lolled forward and she saw the top of his skull had been blown away. His feet were drumming against the floor but she could see from the size of the wound that he was already dead, the kicking was just a nervous reaction. Something dripped down her face and she looked up to see thick globules of blood trickling down from the roof of the plane. She opened her mouth to scream again and blood ran between her lips, making her gag. Behind her, Jamie was screaming for his father.

Sandra wiped her hands across her face and felt the blood smear over her skin. Through the cockpit she saw nothing but the desert and she realised with a jolt that the plane was still diving. She reached for the control wheel and pulled back on it, feeling her stomach churn as the plane's nose came up. She was gasping for breath and her arms were trembling. She looked towards the attitude indicator but her husband's body obscured it, then suddenly his whole body swung away from the instruments as if he'd only been dozing, but she realised it was the deceleration forcing him back. The shaking in her hands intensified and she forced herself to keep her eyes on the instruments and not on her dead husband. The plane levelled off and she decided to accelerate away from the gunmen below rather than wasting time trying to climb. There was a loud crack from somewhere behind her and then another and she yelled at Jamie to lie down across the rear seats. The rudder pedals abruptly lost their resistance as if the cables had been cut and the Cessna began to slide to the right, with the wind. More bullets thudded into the rear of the plane and she felt the control wheel kick in her hands. "Oh God, the fuel," she said, remembering the fuel tanks in the wings above her head. She began twisting the control wheel from side to side, jerking the plane around in the air. Mitchell's body swayed grotesquely, held in place by the seat belt. His blood was dripping everywhere, though thankfully his feet had stopped drumming on the pedals.

Jamie had followed her instructions and was lying across the back seats, sobbing into his hands.

"It's okay, honey, it's going to be okay," Sandra said, though there was no conviction in her trembling voice. Her mind was racing and she couldn't remember what the emergency procedures were. She closed her eyes for a moment and tried to picture the emergency transponder code. Seven Seven Zero Zero. She took her left hand off the control wheel and fumbled with the dials on the transponder, turning them to the four figures which would set alarms ringing at all radar facilities within the range. The wheel jerked in her hand and pulled forward as the plane began to dive again. The engine started to splutter and the whole plane bucked and reared like a runaway stallion. Her hands shook as she keyed in the emergency frequency on the radio: 121.50 MHz. The control wheel began to shudder, making her shoulders vibrate.

“Mom, what’s happening?” screamed her son.

“It’s okay, honey. Stay where you are.” The engine was coughing and the propeller blades became visible as a grey disc as they slowed. Black smoke was pouring from the left side of the engine cowling. According to the altimeter they were a little over a thousand feet above the ground and the vertical speed indicator showed they were dropping at five hundred feet a minute. She clicked on the radio microphone. “Mayday, mayday,” she said. “This is Five Nine Four, position unknown, crash landing.” She couldn’t remember what other information she was supposed to give in a distress call.

The headset crackled but there was no reply. The altimeter was spinning and they were probably too low for anyone to pick up their signal. “Mayday, mayday,” she repeated, she took her thumb off the microphone switch and concentrated on the emergency procedures. She pulled back hard on the control wheel to try to keep the nose up but it suddenly went slack and she knew she’d lost control of the elevators. The dive steepened and the airspeed indicator went above the red line. The plane was diving at its maximum speed but there was surprisingly little sense of movement. Sandra Mitchell became quite detached about her own imminent death. She kept pulling back on the control wheel, knowing that it was quite useless but wanting to do something. She took deep breaths. “It’s all right, honey,” she called to her son. “It’s all right.”

The ground seemed to get no closer until the last hundred feet and then it suddenly rushed up to meet her.

* * *

The Double Tap. The assassin - the world's most successful contract killer. An anonymous professional with a unique calling card - one bullet in the head and one in the chest for each of his targets. The Judas goat - an ex-member of the SAS, Mike Cramer is the perfect sacrificial bait. When the FBI discover the next name on the assassin's hitlist, Cramer is set up to take his place. The wild card - Cramer's past has caught up with him. Ex-IRA extremist Dermot Lynch blames Cramer for his lover's death and he's out for revenge. As Cramer trains for the most dangerous mission in his career, Lynch hunts down his sworn enemy. And the unknown assassin silently closes in on his target. The players are in position for the final deadly game . . . This is the second book to feature Mike Cramer. Here are the first few chapters -

THE DOUBLE TAP

SHE WAS the richest little girl in the world. Rich beyond the dreams of avarice, rich almost beyond comprehension. As she played in the surf, giggling and shrieking and running from the waves, the white-jacketed waiter slowly polished a crystal tumbler and tried to imagine what it must be like to have so much money. The interest on the interest was still more than he’d earn in a lifetime. In a thousand lifetimes, maybe. He polished the crystal diligently and when he held it

up in the Mediterranean sunlight it sparkled like a diamond. He was wearing white cotton gloves so that his fingers wouldn't mark the pristine surface. He placed it on a solid silver tray and reached for another tumbler.

The little girl knelt down by the water's edge and picked up something, a sand crab perhaps, or a pretty shell, and she skipped across the beach to her guardians who sat together under a huge umbrella. The man was her grandfather, wealthy in his own right but nowhere near as rich as the little girl. The woman was her great aunt, a withered husk of a human being, wrapped in a black shawl despite the searing heat. The little girl showed them what she'd found and they smiled benevolently. That they loved and cherished her was beyond doubt. Even from his post a hundred feet from the umbrella, the waiter could see it in their eyes. The old man ruffled the girl's wet hair and her laughter tinkled like a glass windchime. The old woman smiled a toothless smile and said something in Greek.

"No, Auntie," admonished the little girl. "English today. Today we must speak English." The waiter held up the second tumbler and inspected it. The little girl was learning English, Spanish and Russian in addition to her own language. She was only eight years old, but already she was being groomed for the life that lay ahead of her. A life of wealth and power, a life that few other people in the world would believe existed. What could it be like to have so much, the waiter mused? And yet, thought the waiter, she was also to be pitied because the immense wealth had come at a heavy price. She was an orphan: her mother and father had died in a power boat accident the previous year. Now, as she laughed and played, she had only the company of her aged guardians and the men in dark glasses.

There were three bodyguards, big men, wide shouldered and well-muscled, standing close to the umbrella, their heads constantly moving even though there wasn't a stranger within half a mile. It was a private beach, on a private island, one of the dozen or so homes around the world owned by her trust fund, but the bodyguards never let their concentration slip. They wore shorts and brightly coloured shirts and had white smears of sunscreen down their noses, but no one would ever mistake them for holidaymakers. Occasionally the sea breeze would lift their loose shirts to reveal a holstered handgun or a sub-machine pistol. In addition to the three bodyguards on the beach, there were another two in the house and ten more sleeping or relaxing in the barracks next to the swimming pool. The little girl was under guard for every minute of every day; even as she slept two men would stand outside her bedroom door and another two under her window. She was the richest little girl in the world and she was the most protected.

The waiter slid the tumbler onto the tray and covered it with a crisp white cloth so that the crystal wouldn't be desecrated by windblown sand. He was sweating and he had to resist the urge to wipe his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. He kept a wary eye on the old man. It was almost noon and he would soon be wanting his first glass of ouzo of the day.

The little girl ran back to the sea, hopping across the hot sand until she reached the cooler fringes of the water's edge. She squatted down and splayed her hands, palms uppermost, releasing the crustacean she'd so proudly shown the old couple. It was a small crab and it scuttled

sideways, seeking sanctuary in the wet sand. Within seconds it had burrowed to safety and the little girl waved goodbye.

Far out to sea, a powerful speedboat ploughed through the waves. One of the bodyguards put a pair of binoculars to his eyes and studied it for several minutes. He spoke to the other men in Yiddish. They were Israelis, as were all the child's protectors. It had nothing to do with religion, the waiter knew, it was simply that Israeli-trained bodyguards were the best in the world. If necessary they would die to protect their charge.

The old man looked towards the waiter and nodded. The waiter took the ice bucket and the bottle of ouzo out of the gas-powered refrigerator and placed them on the tray. He held it with both gloved hands as we walked gingerly across the burning sand, hot even through his leather-soled shoes. As soon as he stepped out of the shade of the massive umbrella above the bar he felt the sun beat down on his hair and a rivulet of sweat ran down his neck. The three bodyguards were now all standing fifty feet or so behind the little girl, looking over her head at the speedboat which was arcing through the waves, away from the beach. There was more Yiddish, and shrugs.

The ice cubes rattled wetly in the ice bucket and the waiter took extra care where he put his feet on the shifting sand. The old man had bent his head close to the old woman, listening intently. She was probably warning him about drinking too much, the waiter thought, and he smiled to himself. The bodyguards were to the waiter's side, still staring out to sea. He took his right hand off the tray and dropped the ice bucket lid onto the sand before grabbing for the silenced automatic. The metal had been chilled by the ice and he was aware of how pleasant it felt through the cotton gloves as he levelled the gun between the shoulder-blades of the nearest bodyguard. The gun made no more sound than a child's cough and the third bodyguard had only begun to turn when the waiter put two of the mercury-tipped slugs into his back. Out of the corner of his eye the waiter saw the old couple struggling to their feet but he knew there was nothing they could do. They were too old, too feeble, to do anything but watch.

The waiter stepped over the legs of one of the dead bodyguards, the gun now warm to the touch. The child was kneeling in the sand, trying to find the crab. She looked up at him as he approached, smiling because there were only friends on the island, friends and protectors. She frowned when she saw the gun in his hand. The waiter smiled down at her. "Are you frightened?" he asked softly.

She looked up at him and smiled again, hopefully. "No," she said, "I'm not."

The waiter nodded and shot her in the head, then in the chest. Behind him he heard a mournful wail, more of a howl than a scream. He couldn't tell if it was the old man or the woman. In the distance, the speedboat headed in the direction of the shore, its twin engines roaring. The waiter ran towards it as the blood of the richest little girl in the world soaked into the sand.

MIKE CRAMER wiped the condensation from the window of the taxi and peered out. The rain had stopped, though the taxi's windscreen wipers continued to swish back and forth. "You can drop me here," he said to the driver, a sullen rock of a man who hadn't spoken a word all the way from the ferry terminal.

“Suit yourself,” said the driver, jamming on the brakes. Cramer couldn’t remember having said anything that might offend the man. Maybe he’d just heard some bad news. Cramer thrust a twenty pound note into the man’s hands and told him to keep the change, taking some small pleasure from the fact that for the first time the driver’s face cracked into a smile. “You’re sure now?” queried the driver, as if the large tip had provoked a change of heart. “The place you’re wanting is further up the hill, it’s no trouble.”

“I want to walk,” said Cramer, opening the door and shouldering his duffel bag. He trudged up the hill, the wind at his back. He didn’t quite understand himself why he was walking and not driving up to the door. It was symbolic somehow, but he wouldn’t be able to explain the symbolism to anyone. It was something to do with arriving on his own two feet, walking like a man and not being driven like an invalid, but even that felt too simplistic. He slipped his hand into the pocket of the reefer jacket and felt the two brass keys. One for the front door, the solicitor had said, and one for the kitchen door. The kitchen door was also bolted from the inside, so he’d have to go in the front way.

He rested the bag on the pavement and turned to look out over the harbour. To the left bobbed the fishing boats of Howth, sturdy working boats, huddled together as if sheltering from the bitter cold wind but more than capable of taking the worst that the Irish Sea could throw at them. To the right, the weekend boats of the yacht club, their steel lines singing in the wind, their pristine white hulls rocking gently in the swell, tethered neatly in rows along the wooden pontoons of the marina like soldiers on parade. The yacht club building was a creamy yellow colour, its modern lines at odds with the weathered fishing village. Behind the club was a car park, but only two vehicles were parked there and one was a delivery truck. Fair-weather sailors, thought Cramer, and today wasn’t fair weather. He swung the duffel bag back up on his shoulder and grunted. High above his head, seagulls swooped and banked, screaming for attention. Cramer craned his neck back and stared up at them. They reminded him of vultures, gathering over a dying animal. Cramer smiled at the image despite himself.

The cottage was close to the brow of the hill, a hundred feet or more from its nearest neighbour. It was small and squat, a granite pillbox with tiny windows and a steeply sloping roof, built to withstand the raging sea and the storms that blew in from the north-east. It was a hardy home, a home that had outlasted the men who’d built it and that would be around for generations to come. The curtains were drawn and the windows were grimy. The cottage had been empty for more than six months, the solicitor had said. The property market was in a slump and the house was too small for most people. That was why he’d been able to buy it so cheaply. There was another reason, Cramer knew. Few people wanted to move into a house where someone had died. Cramer didn’t care either way.

He dropped the duffel bag onto the stone step and put the key in the rusting lock. The key grated, and for a moment he thought that it would refuse to turn, but then it clicked and he pushed the battered oak door open. He stepped across the threshold, dragging the canvas bag after him. The door opened into the living room, a large brick fireplace to his left, a cramped staircase to the right. An overstuffed armchair sat next to the fire. Cramer noticed that the leather was all scuffed

on the arms and there was a dark, greasy patch on the back of the chair where the previous occupant had sat for hours, staring into the flames. He closed the door behind him. The air was stale and damp so he threw open the single window and allowed the cold salty sea breeze to blow in. Tattered curtains, long faded and thin in places, flapped in the draught like trapped birds. There were ashes in the grate, and on the floor by the chair was an earthenware ashtray containing a single cigarette, stubbed out and broken in half. Next to it stood a tea-stained mug, chipped and cracked. Cramer felt like a detective at a crime scene, though there had been no doubt what had killed the old man who used to live in the house: a massive heart attack in his sleep, brought on by too much whisky and fried food and not enough exercise, coupled with the fact that he'd passed his allotted three score years and ten by a decade or more.

A chipboard door led through into a compact kitchen containing an ancient refrigerator, a dirt-encrusted gas stove and a Welsh dresser. Cramer opened the refrigerator door and the light came on. The solicitor had promised to reconnect the electricity supply and he'd been as good as his word. A packet of long-forgotten cheese sat at the back of the refrigerator, black inside its plastic wrapper, next to a half-used bottle of Heinz tomato ketchup lying on its side as if it had been hurriedly thrown in. Cramer closed the door. The stairs led up to a single bedroom, and Cramer could smell what was within before he pushed open the door. The room was barely twelve feet by ten, little more than a cell with a single bed and a wardrobe. The sheets and blankets had been thrown aside as if the occupant had leapt out of bed, but Cramer knew that the old man had been taken away by ambulancemen, because he'd been dead for a week before anyone knocked at his front door. The sheets were stained with stale urine and faeces and there was long-dried blood on the yellowing pillow. Cramer opened the window and took a deep breath of fresh air.

A door in the corner of the room opened into a tiny bathroom containing a tub so small that he'd have difficulty sitting in it never mind lying down, a washbasin and a toilet. The white plastic lid was down and Cramer flushed without opening it. The cheese had been enough of an unpleasant surprise.

He pulled the soiled sheets and pillowcase off the bed and took them downstairs. There was a cardboard box by the fridge containing old tins and several empty whisky bottles. Cramer dropped the sheets onto the rubbish then unlocked the kitchen door and threw the box outside into a small walled yard. There was a rusting bicycle leaning against the wall, its saddle missing and its chain broken, a reminder of the days when the old man had been able to cycle around the village. Cramer closed the door. The air was fresher and he could breathe without fighting the urge to throw up, but now it was too cold to take off his jacket. There was coal in a brass scuttle and a newspaper on the windowsill, and he soon had a fire burning in the grate. He rubbed his hands and held them out, warming them in front of the flames as he sat in the old man's chair. "There's no place like home," he muttered to himself. Outside, the screams of the gulls grew louder and more insistent.

THE COLONEL put his elbows on his knees and leant forward over the chessboard, his forehead screwed into deep creases as he studied his options. The rook seemed the best bet. He

sat up and reached for the piece, then stopped midway, his hand suspended above the board. No, the bishop. The bishop first, then the rook. He moved the bishop, pressing the piece down hard on the board so that it registered with the computer.

A tiny red light flickered on the side of the plastic board, letting him know that the computer was thinking. The Colonel had developed an intense dislike of the flashing light. He'd only had the chess-playing computer for two weeks, but it was without doubt the most able player he'd ever faced. At its highest setting it could defeat him seventy-five per cent of the time, and he was determined to keep on playing until he could consistently better it. The telephone warbled and he picked up the receiver, his eyes still on the board. He was beginning to have second thoughts. Maybe it would have been better to have moved the rook first and then attacked with his bishop. "Yes?" he said.

"Mike Cramer's surfaced," said a voice that the Colonel instantly recognised.

"Where?" He sat back in his chair.

"Ireland. We spotted him at Holyhead boarding the ferry to Dun Laoghaire."

"There's no doubt?"

The caller sniffed, once. "None at all."

"Where is he now?"

"Howth, north of Dublin. He's bought a cottage there."

"He's what?" The Colonel closed his eyes as if in pain. "What the hell is he up to?" he asked.

The question was rhetorical but the caller answered nonetheless. "We were hoping you'd be able to tell us."

MIKE CRAMER put on his reefer jacket and buttoned it up to the neck as he closed the front door behind him. He didn't bother locking it. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and walked down the road. An elderly woman was standing on a stepladder cleaning the windows of the neighbouring cottage and as he walked by Cramer wished her a good morning. He found a general store facing the west pier and he bought coffee, milk, sugar, and a newspaper, not because there was anything in it he wanted to read but because he'd need it to get the fire going. He wasn't hungry but nonetheless put eggs, bacon and a loaf of bread into the wire shopping basket before handing it to the young lad behind the counter. "Are you here on holiday?" asked the boy as he totalled up Cramer's purchases and put them into a blue plastic carrier bag.

"Nah, I'm living here," said Cramer, passing over a twenty pound note.

The boy frowned. "In Howth? Jesus, I'm doing all I can to move out. There's nothing for anyone here." He gave Cramer his change.

"It's got everything I want," said Cramer. "See you around." He walked along the sea front to a pub built of the same stone as his cottage. Three fishermen in bright orange waterproof jackets were drinking at the bar and they turned as one towards him as he stepped inside. They looked like brothers, balding, broad shoulders, ruddy cheeks and hands gnarled from too much exposure to sea water and cold winds. Cramer nodded a greeting and went to the far end of the bar where

he ordered a double Famous Grouse from the matronly barmaid. He downed the whisky in one go and smacked his lips appreciatively.

“Good?” asked the barmaid.

“Oh yes,” said Cramer.

“Another?”

“Definitely. And have one yourself. While you’re at it, I’d like to buy the guys over there a drink.”

The barmaid beamed and refilled his glass. “Are you celebrating or something?”

“Or something,” said Cramer. He raised the glass and toasted the fishermen.

THE BOY sat in front of the television set and watched the rocket soar through the sky. A flat emotionless voice was calling out numbers but the boy didn’t know what they referred to. Nor did he care. He sat open-mouthed as the rocket and its three astronauts headed for the moon. Just like in the comics. The boy leaned back and put his hands on the floor as he stared at the screen. He tried to imagine what it must be like to be in a space capsule, drinking through a tube and going to the toilet in a space suit. The boy wanted to go to the toilet but he didn’t want to miss one second of the launch. He pressed his legs together and blocked out the thoughts of his full bladder. He heard his name being called but he ignored it and shuffled closer to the screen until his feet were almost under the television set. Something fell away from the bottom of the rocket and for a moment he thought that something had gone wrong, but then he heard the clipped voice say that separation had been successful and he realised that everything was okay.

His mother shouted for him again and the boy leaned forward and turned up the volume. The rocket was a small dot in the sky with a thick white plume trailing behind it. The boy wondered at what point the rocket was actually in space and not in the sky, and if there was a line somewhere up there that separated the two.

There was a banging from his mother’s bedroom, the sound of a walking stick being pounded against the threadbare carpet. The boy got slowly to his feet. The banging was repeated, more rapidly this time. The boy went into the hallway and looked up the stairs. His legs felt like lead. His mother called his name again and the boy put a hand on the banister. He put his foot on the first step. He wished with all his heart for his father, but he was at work and wouldn’t be back for hours. From the sixth step he could see his parents’ bedroom door, painted in the same pale green colour as the rest of the doors in the house. The boy had lived in the house all his life and he couldn’t remember them ever being any other colour. He took the stairs one at a time, pausing between each step, his eyes fixed on the door. “Where are you?” his mother shouted, then he heard her cough.

“I’m coming,” he called and ran up the last few stairs. He gripped the doorknob and pushed open the door. His mother was on the bed on her hands and knees, her body wracked with hacking coughs. Her mousy brown hair was tangled and matted, her eyes were red and puffy and there were stains down the front of her blue flannel nightie. She looked up as he walked into the room and stood at the foot of the bed.

Tears welled in the boy's eyes. "What do you want, Mum?" he asked.

His mother sat back on her heels and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "I just want to get better," she cried.

"Me too," said the boy. "That's what I want too."

She held out her arms and he climbed up onto the bed and clung to her. She smoothed the back of his head with her hands and made small shushing noises. "You've got to be strong," she whispered. "I'm going to need your help." The boy buried his face in the flannel nightie and its smell of sick.

THE MAN in the wheelchair stopped to examine a rack of brightly coloured ties, running the silk through his gloved fingers. A salesman in an immaculate dark blue suit raised an eyebrow but the man in the wheelchair shook his head. Just looking. He put his hands on the wheels and pushed the chair forward. The people who passed him studiously avoided eye contact, as if they were embarrassed by his disability.

He rolled slowly towards the suit section. His legs were wrapped in a thick blue wool blanket and he felt sweat trickle down his thighs. An elderly man was being measured by a young assistant while his much younger fur-coated and clearly bored wife watched. Two Japanese tourists were pulling suits off the racks, holding them up and talking animatedly. The man in the wheelchair smiled to himself. Compared with Tokyo, the prices in Harrods were probably a bargain. He never paid Harrods prices for clothes, never wore anything with a label that could be recognised.

The Arab swept into the menswear department, flanked by two Harrods executives and a trio of bodyguards. The bodyguards were thickset men in black suits and tinted sunglasses and had matching thick moustaches. Saddam Hussein lookalikes. Their eyes swept back and forth like searchlights, but the man in the wheelchair noted with some small satisfaction that they looked right through him. Cripples were always invisible. The Arab was dressed in full desert robes and looked like something out of *Lawrence of Arabia*, totally out of place among the racks of tailored suits. Behind the Arab walked three black-robed women, their faces covered except for their eyes. One was clearly the Arab's mother, she was short and squat and moved like a buoy bobbing in a rough sea. The other two were his wives. The man in the wheelchair propelled himself forward.

One of the wives was a Saudi princess, and by all accounts she was built like a Russian weightlifter. The other, his second wife, was a former *Playboy* centrefold from Utah who'd been about to embark on a movie career when she'd settled for the sheikh and his millions instead. In the black robes, it was impossible to tell the two wives apart. The man slipped his hand under the blanket.

The manager of the menswear department was gushing about how honoured he was to see the valued customer again, rubbing his hands together and bowing obsequiously. One of the bodyguards walked close to the wheelchair, checking out a man standing by the changing rooms. The man in the wheelchair smiled up at the bodyguard, but he was ignored. The silenced

automatic coughed twice under the blanket and the bodyguard fell backwards, blood spreading across his white shirt from two large black holes.

The man in the wheelchair stood up, slipping out from under the blanket like a snake shedding its skin. He took three paces forward and shot the second bodyguard twice in the chest. The man was dead before his knees crumpled. The third bodyguard was reaching for his gun when he took a bullet in the sternum. As he slumped forward, clutching at his chest like a heart attack victim, the man shot him in the head, blowing blood and brain matter across the display of ties.

Shoppers began screaming and running for the exits, but the man was an oasis of calm among the panic. He aimed his gun at the Arab. The Arab's eyes widened in terror, then almost at once he visibly relaxed. The old woman was backing away, her hands held up in front of her face, her mouth open and making loud snoring sounds.

The two wives stood stock still, frozen in terror. Close up the man could see that one was dark, with brown eyes, pockmarked skin. Obviously not the centrefold.

He turned to the other woman, levelled the gun between her big blue eyes and fired, then stepped forward and shot her again in the chest as she fell.

The man spun on his heels and walked quickly to the stairs, the gun at his side. People ran from him, leaving his way clear. Shouts and screams came from behind him, but he kept on walking, his head down. He reached the stairs and went down to the ground floor, keeping the gun pressed to his side. He walked to the Egyptian Hall and took the escalator to the lower ground floor. The screams and shouts had faded away by now, and by the time he stepped off the escalator no one was paying him any attention. He turned left and walked briskly through to the stationery department, as if he had nothing more pressing on his mind than the purchase of an executive writing set.

The door to the stationery stock room was unlocked, as he knew it would be. The man slid the gun into his belt and buttoned his jacket over it as he walked across the store room and into the entrance of the tunnel. Heating pipes ran along the length of the roof of the tunnel and he jumped up and dragged down a brown warehouseman's coat he'd stuck there earlier. The tunnel curved to the right ahead and the man could see that he was alone. He dusted the coat off and slipped it on as he walked among boxes of merchandise waiting to be taken into the store. The tunnel was the main supply route into the store, and the reason why delivery trucks were rarely seen blocking the Knightsbridge streets above.

Glancing in a circular mirror positioned at the bend of the tunnel, he saw several workmen heading his way so he kept his head down and walked purposefully. He wasn't challenged, nor had he been when he'd tried a dry run two days earlier.

Several electric cars rattled past, piled high with more boxes, but the drivers paid him no attention. The tunnel was about five hundred feet long and led to two lifts which went up to the main Harrods warehouse facilities. The man ignored the lifts and raced up the stairs to the single exit door which opened onto Trevor Square. A fresh-faced security guard, a telephone pressed to his ear, was looking his way, his mouth open in surprise, and the man pulled out his gun and shot him in the throat without even breaking stride. The security guard was still dying as the man

closed the exit door and walked out into the sunshine. Ten minutes later he was on the tube, heading for Victoria Station.

MIKE CRAMER held the half-empty bottle of Famous Grouse in his hands, swirling the whisky around as he stared into the fire. He'd made himself a bacon sandwich earlier but it sat untouched on a plate by the chair. He could feel the whisky burning away at the lining of his empty stomach and he knew that he should eat something, but he had no appetite. A shower of soot fell down the chimney, startling him. The flue probably hadn't been swept in years, though the fire burned well enough.

He looked at his wristwatch, more out of habit than because he wanted to know the time. It wasn't as if he had anywhere to go. It was almost midnight. He sat back in the old armchair. It was comfortable and seemed to mould itself to his shape like a living thing. He'd moved it so that he could see the front door and the window and keep his back to the wall though he was still close enough to the fire to feel its warmth. Cramer rolled his head from side to side. He could feel the tension in his neck, the muscles taut and unyielding. He yawned and his jaw clicked, another sign of the strain he was under. He got to his feet and climbed the stairs.

He hadn't been able to buy fresh sheets or a pillowcase in the village so he'd made do with the rough blankets and the stained pillow. He'd spent the night in worse places, and he had no qualms about sleeping in a dead man's bed. Cramer was well past the stage of believing in ghosts. He smiled to himself. Famous Grouse was the only spirit he had any faith in these days. He put the bottle on the floor by the bed and then took the Browning Hi-Power 9mm automatic from his shoulder holster and placed it under the pillow. It was Cramer's fifth night in the cottage. He didn't think it would be much longer.

THOMAS McCORMACK was putting the final touches to a bright red-feathered trout fly of his own design when the phone on his workbench rang. He sighed and stopped what he was doing. It was Aidan Twomey, an old friend and colleague., but after the bare minimum of pleasantries McCormack realised that it wasn't a social call.

"There's a Brit here, Thomas," said Twomey, whispering as if he didn't want to be overheard. "Looks like a Sass-man to me. Living in old man Rafferty's cottage."

McCormack pulled a face as he studied the half-finished fly. "Sure he's not a relative?"

Twomey snorted down the phone. "Rafferty related to a Sass-man? You'll have him spinning in his grave, Thomas. Nah, Rafferty didn't have any relatives over the water. He was the last of his line. No kids and his wife died a few years back. A local solicitor sold the cottage, lock, stock and barrel. Then this Brit moves in."

"And you think he's SAS?"

"I'd bet my life on it, Thomas. He's definitely army, that's for sure. I've seen enough of the bastards in my time, you know that. He was in the pub, on his own, drinking. And he's been taking long walks, like he was waiting for something."

“Doesn’t seem to be keeping a low profile, then?” said McCormack impatiently. He wondered by Twomey was bothering him with such a trivial matter. If the SAS were conducting an undercover operation in Howth, the man would hardly be drinking in the local pub.

“I was wondering if maybe the boys had anything going in Howth. Anything they’d rather keep to themselves.”

“Not a thing, Aidan. Take my word for it.”

“Aye, right enough, right enough. But it’s the way he’s carrying on. Like he was waiting for something to happen.”

McCormack clicked his tongue in annoyance. Initiative was all well and good, but he didn’t appreciate having his time wasted. “Well, thanks for the tip, Aidan. I’ll make a note of it.”

“Cramer,” said Twomey. “Mike Cramer. That’s his name.”

McCormack’s jaw dropped. “What?” he said.

“Mike Cramer. That’s his name. That’s what he told Padraig in the pub. I checked with the solicitor, too, and that’s the name on the deeds of the cottage.”

“This Cramer. Describe him.” McCormack sat hunched over the phone as he made notes on a sheet of paper, the fly forgotten.

“Just over six feet tall, thin but looks like he can take care of himself, you know. Deep-set eyes, his nose is sort of hooked and looks like it might’ve been broken. Brown hair, a bit long. His accent is all over the place, but he’s definitely not Irish. He told Padraig he was from Scotland originally.

“Did he tell Padraig what he was doing in Howth?”

“Enjoying the sea air is all he said. What do you think, Thomas? Did I do the right thing calling you?”

“Oh yes,” said McCormack. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, you did the right thing all right. Now listen to me, Aidan, and listen well. Stay where you are. I’ll have someone down there as soon as possible. Make sure no one goes near him, I don’t want anyone asking him questions. I don’t want him frightened off, okay?”

“Sure. But I don’t think your man’s going anywhere. He’s well settled in at the cottage.”

McCormack replaced the receiver and sat staring at his reflection in the mirror on the wall. Cramer the Sass-man back Ireland, sitting in a pub as if he didn’t have a care in the world. It didn’t make sense. It didn’t make any sense at all.

* * *

The Birthday Girl. Tony Freeman rescued Mersiha when she was fighting for her life in war-torn Yugoslavia. Now she is his adopted daughter, the perfect all-American girl, and the past is another country. Or so it seems. But Mersiha has been trained to kill. And when she discovers that Freeman's company is subject to a sinister takeover bid, she decides to help. Whatever the risks. The consequences of her actions are lethal, for Mersiha has unearthed a conspiracy of terrifying proportions . . . Here are the first few chapters -

THE BIRTHDAY GIRL

IT ALL HAPPENED so quickly that it was only after his abductors had shoved the sack over his head and made him lie down on the floor of the van that Anthony Freeman realised he hadn't said a word. He hadn't begged, pleaded or threatened, he'd just followed their shouted instructions as he'd half crawled, half fallen from the rear of the wrecked Mercedes. He was still in shock from the crash and he'd stumbled towards the van as his captors prodded him with the barrels of their Kalashnikovs.

It was like some crazy, surreal nightmare. Only minutes earlier he'd been standing outside the Holiday Inn, hunched into his sheepskin jacket and wondering whether the far-off rumbling sound was approaching thunder or artillery fire. The Mercedes had arrived on time, rattling along the road with its rear window missing and its licence plates removed. The driver was the man who'd picked him up at Split Airport several days earlier and driven him overland to Sarajevo, taking the dirt road used by the Red Cross to ferry supplies to the besieged city. Zlatko, his name was, father to six children, three of whom had died in the conflict. He'd refused to allow Freeman to help him load the bulky metal suitcase into the boot. It had been Zlatko who'd told Freeman the names of the abandoned villages they'd driven by, some of the ruins still smoking in the cold winter air, and it was Zlatko who'd explained that he'd taken the licence plates off the car to give them a better chance of getting through the many roadblocks. There was no way of knowing in advance who was manning the barricades and a wrong licence plate could be reason enough for a hail of bullets.

Zlatko had done everything possible to avoid the truck as it braked, and if he'd been a less skilful driver the crash would have been a lot worse. As it was, Zlatko's head had slammed into the steering wheel hard enough to stun him, and he'd been unconscious when the doors had been wrenched open. The kidnappers had raked his body with bullets from their assault rifles, the noise deafening in the confines of the car.

There were five of them, maybe six. All Freeman could remember were the black ski masks and the Kalashnikovs and the fact that he'd evacuated his bowels when they'd dragged him from the back seat, screaming at him in heavily accented English.

Freeman couldn't understand what they wanted from him. It wasn't as if he was in Beirut, where hostage-taking was a way of life. He was in Sarajevo; it was snipers and artillery attacks that you had to watch out for. It didn't make sense. The sack smelled of mouldy potatoes and something was crawling across his left cheek but he couldn't get to it because they'd tied his wrists behind his back with rope. His damp trousers were sticking to his skin. He could barely breathe and the musty smell made him want to gag.

Freeman jumped as whatever it was that was crawling around the inside of the sack bit him on the neck. He tried to move, to ease his discomfort, but a foot stamped down between his shoulder-blades and a voice hissed at him to lie still. He lost all track of time as he lay face down on the floor of the van. Eventually he heard his captors talking to each other and the van made a series of sharp turns and came to a halt. Uncaring hands pulled him out. His cramped legs gave

way and as he slumped to the ground the men cursed. More hands clawed at his legs and he was carried bodily.

He heard the crunch of boots on broken glass, then the sounds of a door being thrown open. The footsteps became muffled and he realised he was being carried across a carpeted floor, and then he heard the sound of bolts being drawn back and he was hustled down a flight of wooden stairs. More bolts rattled and without warning he was thrown forward. His legs were still weak and he fell to the ground, his chest heaving from the effort of breathing through the thick, foul-smelling sackcloth. He heard the door crash shut behind him and the grate of rusty bolts and then he was alone in the cellar, more alone than he'd ever been in his life.

THE DOORBELL rang just as Katherine Freeman stepped into the shower and she cursed. She stood under the steaming hot spray and closed her eyes, enjoying the feel of the water as it cascaded over her skin. The doorbell rang again, more urgently this time, and she knew whoever it was wouldn't go away. She climbed carefully out of the shower stall and dried herself with a large pink towel. Downstairs the dog barked, but it was a welcoming yelp rather than a warning growl. Katherine checked herself in the mirror. She'd tied her shoulder-length blonde hair up so that she wouldn't get it too wet in the shower and she shook it free. "This had better be important," she told her reflection. The last thing she wanted was to go downstairs and find two earnest young men in grey suits asking her if she'd been saved.

She pursed her lips and examined the skin around her neck. "Katherine Freeman, you sure look good for a thirty-five-year-old broad," she said, and stuck out her tongue. She threw the towel into a large wicker basket and picked up a purple bathrobe. The doorbell rang again as she ran down the stairs. "I'm coming, I'm coming," she called. If it was Mormons, God help them, she thought. Buffy, her golden retriever, was sitting by the front door, her tail swishing from side to side. "A smart dog would have opened the door," said Katherine, and Buffy chuffed in agreement.

Katherine yanked the door open to find Maury Anderson standing on the porch. He was wearing a plaid sports jacket and brown trousers and his tie looked as if it had been knotted in a hurry. "Maury, I wasn't expecting you," she said, frowning. Anderson said nothing, and Katherine suddenly realised that something was wrong. Her hand flew up to her throat. "Oh God, it's Tony, isn't it? What's happened? Oh my God, what's happened?" Her voice rose and Anderson stepped forward to put his hands on her shoulders.

"It's okay," he said.

"He's dead, isn't he?" She began to shake and Buffy growled, sensing that something was wrong.

"No, he's not dead, I promise you, he's not dead. As far as I know he's not even hurt," Anderson said. His voice was quiet and soothing, as if he were trying to comfort an injured child.

Katherine pushed him away. "What do you mean, as far as you know? Maury, what's happened? Tell me."

"Let's go inside, Katherine. Let's sit down."

Katherine's robe had fallen open but neither she nor Anderson was aware of her nakedness. Anderson closed the door and held her arm as he led her to one of the couches that straddled the fireplace. He sat her down and then without asking he went over to the drinks cabinet and poured her a large measure of brandy with a splash of Coke. He handed it to her and she cupped it in both hands. She looked up at him, still fearing the worst.

"Tony's been kidnapped," Anderson said quietly.

The statement was so surprising that it took several seconds for it to register. Katherine had been sure that her husband had been involved in a traffic accident. Kidnappings happened to politicians or millionaires, not the boss of a struggling defence contractor. "Kidnapped?" she repeated. "You mean the Mafia or something?"

"No, not the Mafia," Anderson said. He sat down on the sofa, his hands clasped in his lap. "Terrorists are holding him hostage."

"Terrorists? In Italy?" Katherine remembered reading about terrorist groups in Italy who'd killed businessmen, shot them in the head and left them in their cars. Her heart raced.

Anderson took a deep breath. "He was in Sarajevo, Katherine."

"What the hell was he doing in Sarajevo?" She took a large mouthful of the brandy and Coke and gulped it down. There was a pewter cigarette case on the coffee table. She opened it and took out a cigarette. Her hand shook as she lit it.

"He was there to demonstrate our mine clearance system. We were putting together a deal."

"But he told me he was in Rome. He called me yesterday morning."

"I know, I know. He flew to Split and then drove to Sarajevo. It's a long story, but the upshot is that he's been taken hostage by Bosnian terrorists."

"What do they want?" Her voice was wavering and she fought to keep it steady.

"I don't know. All I've had is a phone call. They said we weren't to speak to the police and that we'd be contacted with their demands. If we call in the authorities, they'll kill him."

Katherine's hands shook so much that her drink spilled. Anderson took the glass from her hands. She grabbed at his arm. "What do we do, Maury? Tell me, what do we do?"

Anderson looked at her levelly. "That's up to you, Katherine," he said. Buffy whined and put her head on Katherine's knee.

"The FBI can't help us?" Katherine asked.

"It's out of their jurisdiction," Anderson said. "We'd have to go to the State Department."

"So let's do that."

"Katherine, Tony shouldn't even be in Serbia, never mind doing business there. There's a UN embargo."

"So? Tony's still an American citizen. The State Department has to get him back."

"Actually, the fact that he's Scottish makes it more complicated."

"Damn it, Maury. He's my husband. He's got a Green Card. The State Department has to take care of him."

"There's a war being fought over there. It's a shambles. No one's sure who's fighting who. We're not even sure who the bad guys are."

“Goddamn it, Maury, what was Tony doing there? What the hell was he doing there?” Her voice broke and she began to sob uncontrollably. She stubbed out the cigarette. Anderson took her in his arms and held her, tight.

“He was trying to help the firm,” Anderson said. “We’re desperate for contracts, you know that.”

Katherine dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. “I can’t believe he didn’t mention that he was going to Sarajevo.”

“We didn’t know until he was in Rome. The Serbs insisted on seeing him on their territory.”

“Maury, this doesn’t make any sense. I thought there was an exclusion zone or something around Sarajevo.”

“Yeah, there is. He had to fly to a place called Split and then drive overland. The Serbs insisted, Katherine. We had to do it.”

“We?” Katherine said. “We? What do you mean? I don’t see you out there.”

Anderson ignored her angry outburst. “We needed the contract,” he said. “He probably didn’t want to worry you. But as you know we’re having cash-flow problems and we have to take orders from wherever we can.”

Katherine pushed him away. “But you said there was a UN embargo? Doesn’t that mean we can’t sell to the Serbs?”

Anderson shrugged. “There are ways around all blockades,” he said. “There are middle-men in Europe who’ll handle it. Everybody’s doing it. Not so long ago the Russians sold 360 million dollars’ worth of weapons to them.”

“Yes, but we’re not Russians,” Katherine said. “We’re an American company.”

Anderson sighed. “Look, the Russians were selling T-55 tanks and anti-aircraft missiles, serious weaponry. We’re just talking about a few mine clearance systems. That’s all.”

“But you’re saying that the authorities won’t help us because Tony shouldn’t have been there in the first place?”

“That’s right,” Anderson said. “But you’re missing the point. We can’t get help from anyone. If we do and the terrorists find out, they’ll kill him.”

Katherine closed her eyes, fighting the urge to slap Anderson across the face. “Damn you, Maury,” she hissed. “What have you done?”

THERE WERE six guards taking it in turns to watch over Freeman, and over his weeks in captivity he’d made some sort of contact with them all. Freeman knew that the psychiatrists referred to it as the Stockholm Effect, when a hostage begins to form a relationship with his captors, but he also knew that there was a more fundamental reason for his need to communicate with his guards—sheer boredom. They allowed him no books or newspapers, no television or radio, and for long periods he was left alone, chained to a disused boiler in the freezing-cold basement.

FOUR OF the men appeared to speak no English at all and communication with them was restricted to nods and gestures, but even their surly grunts were better than the hours of mind-numbing isolation. The fifth man's name was Stjepan, and he appeared to be the leader of the group. He was in his early twenties, thin and wiry with deep-set eyes that seemed to stare at Freeman from dark pits either side of a hooked nose. He spoke reasonable English but slowly and with such a thick accent that often he had to repeat himself to make himself understood. Stjepan told Freeman why he was being held hostage, and what would happen to him if the group's demands were not met. On the second day of his captivity, Stjepan had Freeman's aluminium suitcase brought down into the basement and demanded that he show him how to work the equipment it contained. Freeman had complied, though Stjepan's limited English meant it took several hours. The equipment was then carefully repacked into its case and taken back upstairs. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Stjepan had punched Freeman in the face, hard enough to split his lip.

A Sony video camera was brought down into the cellar and Freeman was handed a badly typed script to read. As he struggled with the poor grammar and inept vocabulary of the statement, he realised that the punch had probably been planned in advance to give more authenticity to the video, but the thought didn't make it hurt any the less. Freeman asked if he could record a personal message to his wife and Stjepan had agreed. When he'd finished Freeman was given a plate of watery stew and left alone.

While they waited for a response to the video, Stjepan was an occasional visitor to the basement, and Freeman felt it was because the young man wanted to practise his English. There was no further violence, which reinforced Freeman's belief that the punch in the face had been for effect rather than to punish him, but Stjepan always kept his assault rifle close by and left Freeman in no doubt that he was prepared to use it.

During his hours alone in the basement, Freeman spent a lot of time thinking about his wife and son, and it seemed that the more he replayed the memories the stronger they became. He began to recall events and conversations that he had thought were long forgotten, and as he sat on the cold concrete floor he wept for the life that had been taken from him. He missed his wife and he missed his son.

He lost track of time after just a few days. The basement was without windows and illuminated by a single bulb which hung from the ceiling by a frayed wire. Sometimes it was on but usually he was in darkness. Electricity was as scarce as medical supplies in the war-torn city. His meals came at irregular intervals, so he had no way of knowing what time, or day, it was.

The wait for news of the Bosnian's demands seemed interminable. Stjepan said that the tape was being sent over to the United States because they wanted to deal directly with Freeman's company. Freeman knew that made sense: the US government prohibited the sort of deal he'd been planning to sign with the Serbian Forces and he doubted that they would want to negotiate with Bosnian guerrillas. Once Maury Anderson heard that he was in trouble, Freeman knew he'd move heaven and earth to get him out. If anyone was to blame for Freeman's predicament it was Anderson and his insistence that Freeman fly to the former Yugoslavia to find new markets for

the minefield clearing system they'd developed. NATO forces had turned him down flat, saying that they were developing their own system, and the only real European interest had come from the Serbian forces. A representative of the Serb military had made contact with Freeman in Rome and asked him to fly to Split for a demonstration. Freeman had wanted to refuse and had called Anderson in Baltimore to tell him as much. That was when his partner had broken the news of yet another US Army contract that had fallen through. The workforce of almost two hundred men was depending on Freeman, and if he didn't come up with a European contract soon almost half of them would have to be laid off. CRW Electronics was a family firm, founded by Freeman's father-in-law, and Freeman knew every one of the employees by name. Anderson had put him in an impossible position. He had no choice but to go.

TWELVE HOURS later he was in a hotel in Split meeting a German middle-man who knew how to slip through the US trade blockade, for a price. Everything had been done in secrecy, including getting the equipment into the country on a mercy relief convoy, and Freeman had no idea how the Bosnians had discovered what he was up to. He'd asked Stjepan, but the man had refused to answer.

Stjepan was more forthcoming on his own background. Over the course of several days, he told Freeman that he had been fighting since Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence in June 1991, splitting the Balkans into warring factions. He was a Muslim and his parents had been killed by Serbs, though he refused to go into details. His sister, Mersiha, was also one of Freeman's guards and more often than not it was the young girl who brought his food and emptied the plastic bucket that they made him use as a toilet. Unlike Stjepan, Mersiha refused to talk to Freeman. At first he assumed that she couldn't speak English, because no matter what he said to her she glared at him as if she wished he were dead, and some days she would put his food just out of reach and later take it away, untouched.

Freeman waited until Stjepan seemed in a relaxed mood before asking him about his sister. He said that she had been particularly hard hit by the death of their parents, and that she could speak some English. Their mother had been a schoolteacher, he said. Freeman asked Stjepan why he had the young girl with him but Stjepan shrugged and said there was nowhere else for her to go.

Mersiha's black hair was tied back in a ponytail and her face was always streaked with dirt but there was no disguising her natural prettiness. Freeman knew that she'd be a lot prettier if she smiled and it became almost a compulsion, the urge to crack her sullen exterior and expose the real girl beneath. He greeted her each time she came down the steps, and thanked her when she put his food close enough for him to reach. He even thanked her whenever she emptied his plastic bucket, and he always used her name, but no matter how pleasant he tried to be, her expression never altered. Eventually he could stand it no more and he asked her point blank why she was so angry with him. His question seemed to have no more effect than his pleasantries, and Freeman thought that maybe she hadn't understood, but then she turned to him, almost in slow motion, and pointed her Kalashnikov at his stomach. The gun seemed huge in her small hands, but she handled it confidently and he watched in horror as her finger tightened on the trigger. He cowered

as the young girl's lips parted into a grimace of hatred and contempt. "I hope they let me kill you," she hissed, and jabbed at him with the barrel of the gun as if it had a bayonet on the end. She looked as if she was going to say something else but then the moment passed and she regained her composure. She turned to go, but before she went back up the stairs she kicked his bucket to the far side of the basement, well beyond the reach of the chain.

The next time Freeman saw Stjepan he asked him why his sister seemed to hate him so much. Stjepan shrugged and in broken English said that he didn't want to talk about his sister. And he warned Freeman not to antagonise her. Freeman nodded and said he understood, though he wasn't sure that he did. He asked Stjepan how old the girl was and the man smiled. She'd be thirteen years old the following day.

As soon as she came down the stairs the next day, carrying a plate of bread and cheese, Freeman wished her a happy birthday in her own language, trying to pronounce it exactly as Stjepan had told him. She showed no reaction as she put the tin plate on the floor and pushed it towards him with her foot, covering him all the time with the Kalashnikov. Switching back to English, he told her that he had wanted to get her a present but that he hadn't been able to get to the shops. Her face remained impassive, but at least she was listening to him and her finger remained outside the trigger guard. Freeman began to sing 'Happy Birthday' to her, his voice echoing off the walls of his prison. She looked at him in disbelief, a worried frown on her face as if she feared that he'd gone crazy, then she realised what he was doing. When she smiled, it was as if the sun had come streaming into the basement.

MAURY ANDERSON'S office was like the man himself – showy, pretentious even, and definitely built for comfort. Katherine walked across the plush green carpet and sat down on the imported sofa which curved around one corner of the room. It was the best office in the building, with its view of the woods and fields, and no expense had been spared on its furnishings. It was the office that the company used to impress its clients. Her husband's office was in stark contrast, a small cubicle overlooking the car park with a threadbare carpet, cheap teak veneered furniture and one sagging couch.

Katherine studied Anderson as she lit a Virginia Slim. He was pacing up and down in front of his massive eighteenth-century desk, rubbing his hands together. He was dressed as if he were going to a funeral: a black suit, starched white shirt, sombre tie and gleaming black shoes. "You said you'd heard from the kidnappers," Katherine said, crossing her legs.

"Uh-huh," Anderson grunted. "It arrived by Federal Express an hour ago."

Katherine looked across at the large-screen television and video recorder which was normally used to show the firm's promotional films to clients. "A video?"

Anderson stopped pacing. Katherine had never seen him so tense. She wondered how bad it could be. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

Katherine shook her head. "Just show me the video, Maury," she said. She took a long drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke out through tightly pursed lips.

"You'd better prepare yourself, Katherine. He doesn't look too good."

Katherine nodded curtly and Anderson pressed the 'play' button. The screen flickered and then Tony was there, sitting on a stool and holding a sheet of paper that looked as if it had been torn from a child's exercise book. He was staring at the camera, then he jumped at a whispered command. He began to read from the note.

"I am held by Bosnian forces who are struggling against invaders from Serbia. The Serbs are killing our country like Hitler in Europe." Tony grimaced at the unwieldy English and looked off-screen. A harsh whisper told him to go on. "Anyone who trades with the Serbian invaders is an enemy of the people of Bosnia and will be treated so. If I am to be released, you must agree not to sell your weapon to the Serbs."

"Weapon?" Katherine said. Anderson held up a hand telling her to keep quiet until the end of the message.

"As compensation for breaking the United Nations embargo, you will give the Bosnian forces fifty of the equipment." Tony broke off from reading and looked at the camera. "They mean fifty of the MIDAS systems, Maury. They'll want the complete kits." The man standing behind the camera told Tony to keep to the script, but Tony insisted that he had to explain what was meant so that there'd be no misunderstanding. The off-screen voice grudgingly agreed. "They also want a quarter of a million dollars in cash, Maury. When it and the equipment is delivered to our contact in Rome, I'll be released," Tony continued. His voice faltered. "If this doesn't happen, I'll be killed. This video is proof that I'm alive and well. You'll be contacted within the next few days so that arrangements can be made."

The screen flickered as if the camera had been switched off and then Tony reappeared, looking directly into the camera. It felt to Katherine as if he was staring right at her and she shivered. "Katherine, I love you," he said. "Please don't worry, this will work out all right, I promise." His hand went up to his bruised and unshaven face and he smiled thinly. "Don't let this upset you. I cut myself shaving," he said. He smiled, and for a moment it seemed almost genuine. "They're treating me okay, and if Maury does as they ask they say I'll be released unharmed. I think they mean it, so just hang in there. I'll be back before you know it."

A whispered command made him turn to his right and Katherine got a closer look at his battered face. "Oh my God," she whispered. "What have they done to you?"

"Just one more minute," Tony pleaded, then he turned back to the camera. "Don't even think about coming over here, Katherine. It's not safe. They'll probably release me in Split and I'll fly to Europe, Rome maybe. I always promised you a trip to Rome, remember? I love you, Katherine, and..."

The screen went blank in mid-sentence. Katherine turned to Anderson. "Have they been in touch yet?"

Anderson shook his head. "No. Like I said, the video's only just arrived. I'll stay here night and day until they call."

"He's in a terrible state, Maury."

"I think it looks worse than it is. They haven't let him wash or shave."

"Maury, he's been beaten."

Anderson went behind his desk and sat down. "I don't know what to do, Katherine."

Katherine realised she'd finished her cigarette. She stubbed the butt in a crystal ashtray and lit another. "Do we have the equipment?"

Anderson nodded. "Sure. We were planning to sell them to the Serbs. They're all ready to go, complete with Serbo-Croat instruction manuals."

Katherine blew a tight plume of smoke up to the ceiling. "So we do as they say."

"You realise that with the cash we're talking about a million dollars, give or take?" Anderson said.

Katherine's eyes hardened. "And you realise that we're talking about my husband," she said coldly. "Give or take."

Anderson held her glance for several seconds, then he nodded. "I'll make the arrangements," he said quietly.

"Do that, Maury," Katherine said. "Do whatever it takes."

* * *

The Hungry Ghost. 1991 in Hong Kong and the colony is preparing for Chinese rule. Geoff Howells, a government-trained killing machine, is brought out of retirement and sent there. His brief: to assassinate Chinese Mafia leader, Simon Ng. Howells devises a dangerous and complicated plan to reach his intended victim - only to find himself the next target. Patrick Dugan, a Hong Kong policeman, has been held back in his career because of his family connections - his sister is married to Simon Ng. But when Ng's daughter is kidnapped and Ng himself disappears, Dugan gets caught up in a series of violent events and an international spy ring that has spun out of control . . . I might one day bring back Dugan in another book, he's one of my favourite characters. Here are the first couple of chapters –

HUNGRY GHOST

THE DOOR opened with no sound on well-oiled brass hinges. Two men and a girl came in on tiptoe like students on a Rag Week stunt. The girl was dressed in a nurse's uniform, starched white with a pocket over her right breast, and white shoes. On her head was a white cap and she carried a small, black leather bag. She was barely five feet tall, but perfectly in proportion, so that standing alone and from a distance it was hard to judge her height. But with a man either side of her in the gloom it was obvious that she was petite, far too small to ever be a model but pretty enough to break hearts.

She moved over to the bottom of the bed and beckoned the men to move to either side. They wore dark business suits, but they wore them badly as if unused to the feel of heavy cloth and long sleeves. While the girl had the soft, well-cared-for skin of a city creature, the men looked

weather-beaten and worn as if they'd spent their lives in the fields. And while the girl looked as if she'd never had to lift anything heavier than a lipstick, the men were well-muscled and strong.

The girl gently placed her bag on the foot of the bed, close to the sleeping man's feet and silently opened it. She nervously licked her upper lip, a quick showing of her small, pink tongue, and she took a deep breath, the soft mounds of her breasts pushing the uniform up. She nodded, once, and the two men moved at the same time to grab an arm each. The man on the left, the slightly smaller of the two, reached across and clamped a hand firmly across the sleeper's mouth. He woke with a start and began kicking his legs up and down and twisting his shoulders, his eyes wide with fright and shock. He tried to scream, to force air out of his heaving chest, but the bitter-smelling hand muffled all sound except for a pig-like grunt, too quiet to be heard outside the room. He tried to thrash his head from side to side but the hand held him steady. He tried to bare his teeth to bite the flesh but the thumb was under his chin and painfully squeezing his mouth shut. The men, neither of whom he could see, pulled his arms to the side so that he lay crucified, rigidly held to the bed above the waist but still kicking his legs and grunting. They held him until his legs tired and the grunting stopped. The panic eased somewhat as he realized that they hadn't hurt him. Maybe they just wanted to give him a message, didn't want him to disturb the rest of the party. Perhaps if he lay quietly they'd move the hand and allow him to speak, perhaps they'd tell him what they wanted. He relaxed, let himself go loose to show that he wasn't struggling anymore. But they kept his arms outstretched and the hand stayed where it was, forcing him to breathe noisily through his nostrils.

He became aware of the girl then. He could just make out the top of her head, the white cap and below it two oval-shaped eyes. He felt a weight press down on the bottom of the bed and then saw her face clearly as she climbed up and knelt down with her knees either side of his legs. She had high cheekbones and finely arched eyebrows, and she watched him with a look of quiet amusement. She was gorgeous, no doubt about it, and he couldn't take his eyes off her pouting lips. Her tongue came out and she licked them, slowly and sensuously, like a cat, and began to move up his body, moving one knee at a time. It was a hot night and he was naked under the sheet and he could feel the coolness of her thighs through the cotton. She looked like a nurse, he thought, but what was a nurse doing in his room in the middle of the night and who were the men? For a wild moment he thought he might be in hospital, suffering from amnesia or something, or perhaps he'd had a breakdown. But he knew he was still in the Embassy compound, in the bed he'd occupied for the past three nights. He wasn't in hospital and this wasn't a dream.

She reached his thighs and settled back, nestling her firm buttocks on his knees. Her lips drew back in a teasing smile and he saw white even teeth and behind them her small pointed tongue. Her ears had no lobes, he noticed, and her skin was flawless. She wasn't flat-chested like many Chinese girls, he could see the swell of her breasts under the white dress. His gaze wandered down the line of studs on the front of her dress, down between her breasts to her lap. The dress had ridden up her thighs and he could see her knees by squinting his eyes. Then he saw the hypodermic in her hand and he froze. It began to move upwards and he watched it like a rabbit

hypnotized by a snake. The girl held it in front of her face, needle upwards. In her other hand she held a small vial, containing a colourless liquid, which she pushed onto the needle and extracted fluid from.

The man groaned and began to buck up and down and rock from side to side. The girl gripped him tightly with her thighs as if riding a horse, then she slid up his body until she was sitting on his groin. The dress rode higher up her legs and he caught a glimpse of suspenders and white lace panties. She finished filling the syringe and then popped the empty vial into her breast pocket. The man felt himself grow hard under the sheet, and the girl felt it too. She pressed down against him and smiled, enjoying the feel of his maleness, so close to her, just a sheet separating them. She reached down between her thighs and stroked him, just once. To tease him. Then she removed her hand and tapped the glass with a long, red-painted fingernail and watched the bubbles closely as they rose to the top, under the needle. She gently squeezed the plunger at the bottom, creating a miniature fountain that played over her hands.

The man panicked then, he thrust up and down, trying with all his might to throw her off. He shook his head violently from side to side, eyes rolling with fear, but the hand round his mouth tightened and locked him still. Her cap fell off and black hair tumbled down over her face and across her shoulders, a solid curtain of blackness. She flicked it back and it cascaded around her face. He tried rolling his hips but she just gripped him tighter and moved with him. She reached forward with her left hand and ran her fingertips down his cheek.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I promise," she said in unaccented English that took him by surprise. He began to sob quietly but lay still, and then she leant forward and injected the contents of the hypodermic into his right arm. Tears rolled down his cheeks and trickled along the side of the hand that kept his mouth clamped shut. She put the empty hypodermic on the bed and he felt a coldness travel up his arm, like pins and needles. She moved forward, placed her hands on the pillow, and kissed him softly on the forehead. He caught the fragrance of jasmine and then it hit his heart and his chest exploded in pain and he died, no sound because his jaw was still locked tight.

The girl shuddered, either with pleasure of relief, and then slid off the bed, gathering up the hypodermic and replacing it in the bag. The men arranged the dead man's arms under the sheet, and then the three left the room as silently as they'd entered just three minutes earlier.

SUNDAY WAS a hell of a funny day to be summoned down to Suffolk to see your boss's boss, but it wasn't the sort of invitation that Donaldson could turn down. In fact invitation was the wrong word, he'd been ordered down by Grey, even though the order had come in a very obtuse form. Grey was his normal soft-spoken self on the phone, but there had been no doubt in Donaldson's mind that something was worrying the man.

When Donaldson took the call his first thought had been that he was about to be sacked, that the latest round of positive vetting had uncovered his little secret. He'd been careful to cover his tracks and whenever he met others who shared his tastes he'd used a false name, but these days you could never be sure; it was always a risk. And perhaps it was the possibility of being caught

that added to the excitement. But Grey had simply said that he'd needed his help and that it was something that had to be dealt with out of the office.

He'd been given quite a complicated set of instructions to follow to reach the house and once he'd left the main road he'd had to stop a couple of times to read the scribble he'd jotted down on the back of an internal memo. It had rained for a while, which hadn't helped. It was the height of summer but the weather owed more to November. It was almost chilly, and had been for the best part of a week. A freak north wind, said the forecasters. Bloody typical, thought Donaldson.

He was ten minutes late and Grey was waiting for him at the entrance to the drive. He was holding open a wooden gate which he closed behind Donaldson's Toyota as it pulled up in front of the thatched farmhouse.

As he climbed out of the car Donaldson instantly felt over-dressed in his light blue suit. Grey had swapped his customary Savile Row pinstripe for baggy cord trousers and a thick white fisherman's sweater. With his greying temples and weather-beaten face he looked more like the head of a farming family than an off-duty civil servant. He shook Donaldson limply by the hand and took him along the hall past a selection of tasteful hunting prints and into a sitting-room packed with plush settees and Victorian furniture. It was very much a woman's room, with pretty lace things on the backs of the chairs and a collection of old perfume bottles on a circular table in one corner. On top of a large television set was a collection of brass-framed photographs of the Grey clan. A fire was burning merrily in a white-painted metal fireplace that looked original and Grey gestured towards the two floral-patterned easy chairs either side of the blaze. In between the chairs was a low coffee table on which stood a fine bone china tea-set and a silver teapot. There was also a plateful of crumpets dripping with butter.

The two men sat down and made small talk while Grey poured. The conversation turned towards the office, and workloads and politics. Donaldson felt uneasy; Grey wouldn't normally even say hello to him if they passed in a corridor. Donaldson was a Grade 2 admin assistant, albeit with a high security classification. His main job was to keep track of expenses of agents in the field, he was always at arm's length from operations. The nearest he got to the sharp end of intelligence work was to read thrillers by Brian Freemantle and John le Carré.

The fire crackled in the grate, the logs moving against each other like uneasy lovers. A gust of wind blew down the chimney and a plume of smoke bellowed under the rim of the fireplace and wafted gently towards the ceiling, filling the air with the fragrant scent of burning pine.

"There's nothing like an open fire," said Donaldson, settling back in the chair and enjoying the warmth but wishing that his host would just get on with it. Men of Donaldson's rank didn't get social invitations for tea and crumpets in deepest Suffolk.

"It's worth the effort," replied Grey.

Sure, thought Donaldson. Grey probably kicked his wife out of bed in the morning to empty the ashes, fill the grate and blow on burning newspapers until the bloody thing was lit. Either that or he'd have a servant to do it. Grey wasn't the sort of man who'd be caught dead with a dustpan and brush in his liver-spotted hands.

"More tea?" asked Grey, proffering the silver teapot.

“Thank you, no, sir,” Donaldson replied politely. He already wanted to visit the toilet.

“I suppose you’re wondering why I asked you here,” said Grey, as he poured himself another cup.

Of course not, you silly old fool, thought Donaldson, but he merely smiled and nodded, once.

“We have a problem in Hong Kong,” continued Grey.

“Or to be more precise, we have a problem over the border, in China.” He stirred his tea thoughtfully, the spoon clinking gently against the cup. “You are of course aware of the massive loss of confidence in the colony, especially after what happened in Tiananmen Square. There has been a rush to get out, businesses are thinking twice about investing there, the place is a shambles. The British Government is struggling to make the transition in 1997 as smooth and painless as possible.”

He replaced the spoon in the saucer and sipped the tea with relish.

“The Government has already made it clear that we cannot offer sanctuary to all the six million Chinese who live in Hong Kong, so it’s vital that we keep the lid on things, if you follow me. Once Hong Kong is part of China, of course, it is no longer our problem. Until then our intelligence services are doing everything they can to nip any trouble in the bud. We are actively seeking to dissuade those local politicians and businessmen who are trying to delay the handover, or to impose restrictions which we know the Chinese will find unacceptable.”

Grey gave his pale imitation of a smile and leant forward to place his cup and saucer on the table between them.

“That is background, background you are no doubt aware of. Now to the problem in hand. There is a nuclear power station in China, some six miles away from Hong Kong. The authorities in Beijing have received a threat to destroy it, to blow it up.”

“My God!” said Donaldson. “A nuclear explosion six miles from Hong Kong?”

“Strictly speaking, it wouldn’t actually be a nuclear explosion,” said Grey, clasping his hands and resting them in his lap. “As I understand it, a conventional explosive device has been placed in the foundations, close to the reactor. If detonated it will crack open the reactor and lead to the sort of thing we saw at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. Not a nuclear explosion, but the release of a cloud of radioactive material. Hong Kong, I should add, tends to be downwind of the power station.”

Donaldson fell silent as his mind tried to grasp the enormity of Grey’s revelation. There were so many questions to ask that he didn’t know where to start and he was relieved when the old man began speaking again.

“MI6 tells us that the ultimatum was delivered to Beijing by one of the triads in Hong Kong, the Chinese mafia if you like. They are especially fearful of what will happen when the colony comes under full Chinese jurisdiction. They execute criminals in China, you know. In football stadiums. Parents take their children to watch.” He shook his head sadly. “It’s a simple matter for the big hongks like Jardine Matheson to switch their domicile to Bermuda, or for the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank to invest money overseas and transfer its capital around the world, but the triads are firmly rooted in Hong Kong. They cannot afford to give up their illegal activities in the

colony. They simply have too much to lose. So with only a few years to go before the British pull out they have decided that their only hope is to delay the handover. They want the *status quo* to continue, for fifty years at least.”

“Why fifty years, sir?” asked Donaldson.

Grey smiled thinly at the man’s lack of knowledge. “In 1997 Hong Kong will be given back to China, but for fifty years after handover it will operate under its own rules and regulations. It will have its own Government, including its own elected representatives, and its own laws, which are currently being drafted. It will be part of China, but at the same time separate from it. Special Administrative Region, I think they’re going to call it. It will stay that way until 2047 when it will become just another part of China. But during those fifty years the policing of Hong Kong will be the responsibility of the Chinese. And it is that which is worrying the triads.”

“I thought they were bailing out along with anyone else who can afford to buy a passport, sir,” said Donaldson, and was rewarded with a nod from the older man.

“Yes, but it’s not as simple as that. Any sort of criminal record will stop them getting into Canada, Australia or the United States. The middle classes and the rich have no problems buying second passports, but it’s standard practice in most Western countries to cross-check with Special Branch in Hong Kong to ensure that applicants don’t have triad connections. I’ve no doubt they could buy a passport from Andorra but most of them have nowhere to go. Some have managed to get out and as a result many of the triads are active overseas. They operate anywhere where there are Chinatowns . . . or Chinese restaurants. But the bulk of their income comes from vice, drugs and extortion in Hong Kong. And they are naturally reluctant to lose that revenue.”

“But surely, sir, contaminating Hong Kong is no answer?”

Grey shrugged and reached for his cup and saucer again. “It seems to be a sort of scorched-earth policy. If they can’t have it, no one else will. But I suppose they assume that their demands will be met.”

“All they want is for the police force to remain British, you say?”

Grey drained his cup and sighed. “You know what happens when you give in to blackmail, particularly where terrorists are involved. You submit once and the stakes are raised next time. The Chinese are not stupid. They know if they give in to this demand then more will follow. And to be frank, there is not one hope in hell of the Chinese or the British agreeing. The British Government just wants a clean withdrawal and the Chinese want complete control. No, their demands will not be met. The men behind it must be stopped.”

Donaldson nodded.

“That’s why I need your help,” said Grey.

“I don’t follow, sir,” said Donaldson, feeling out of his depth.

“On no account must the Chinese be aware that we know of the blackmail threat. We haven’t been approached officially, nor will we be. That is why we cannot deal with this through normal channels, as news would soon filter back to Peking.”

“I hardly think we have any Chinese double-agents, sir,” said Donaldson smugly.

"If we have I wouldn't expect you to know about them," said Grey, and Donaldson winced at the reprimand. "No, our department cannot be involved officially. Or unofficially for that matter."

"So you want me to arrange a freelance, sir?"

"No," said Grey, carefully putting his cup and saucer back on the table and looking wistfully at the now empty teapot. "No, not a freelance." He looked up at Donaldson, eyes shining like a ferret's. "We want to use Howells."

Donaldson stiffened as if he'd been plugged into the mains.

"Howells is dead," he said.

"Retired," stressed Grey.

"That's what I mean," said Donaldson.

"No," smiled Grey. "I mean he really *was* retired. Pensioned off. He's alive, and available."

Donaldson sank back into the easy chair, his mind whirling as it tried to come to terms with what he'd heard.

"Howells is a psychopath," he spluttered.

"Actually, I think the phrase the psychologists use is sociopath, admittedly with homicidal tendencies. Though you'll have to take it from me that Geoff Howells is a changed man, for the moment at least. Have you seen the garden?"

The change in subject caught Donaldson by surprise. "I'm sorry, sir?" he said.

"The garden, have you seen the garden? Come on, I feel like a walk."

He led the younger man down along the hall to the back door where he pulled off his slippers and donned a pair of green Wellington boots. He gestured towards a matching pair.

"The grass is still wet. Try those for size. They're my son's, he's up at Oxford."

He would be, thought Donaldson. The boots fitted, though.

Grey hauled open the door to be greeted by two heaving Labradors, one black, one golden-brown, tongues lolling out of the corners of their mouths, tails wagging madly, overjoyed to see their master. Donaldson had seen similar reactions from section heads going into Grey's monthly think-tank meetings. Not that Donaldson had ever attended one. The black dog leapt up and tried to lick Grey's face and he pushed it away, though obviously pleased at the show of affection.

"Down, Lady," he said, but there was no harshness in his voice.

The dogs ran in circles around the two men as they walked along the edge of the lawn which sloped gently down towards a small orchard. The grass formed a triangular shape with the base at the house and the clump of apple trees filling the apex. The garden was bordered by a thick privet hedge some ten feet high and between it and the lawn was a wide flower bed packed with plants and bushes. The air was cool and moist and Donaldson breathed in deeply, savouring its freshness.

"Do you live in the country?" asked Grey.

"Ealing, sir," replied Donaldson.

"Ah," said Grey quietly, as if he'd just heard that Donaldson was an orphan.

“I have garden, though,” Donaldson added, and then inwardly squirmed as he realized how lame that sounded. They walked in silence for a while until Grey sniffed the air and turned to peer upward at the roof.

“Damn chimney’s smoking too much, I’ll have to get it swept. Have you any idea how much it costs to have a chimney swept?”

Donaldson didn’t; his three-bedroomed semi had radiators in every room.

They wandered into the orchard, a dozen or so trees twice the height of a man, a mixture of apple, pear and plum, and Grey carefully inspected each one.

“Do you think they need spraying?” asked Grey, but Donaldson guessed it was rhetorical.

You never knew with Grey, that was the problem. He was often so subtle, so obtuse, that it was easy to miss what he was trying to say. He’d once called in one of his departmental heads for a half-hour chat and the poor man had walked out of the office without even realizing that he’d been sacked. It wasn’t until Grey passed him in the corridor a week later that he discovered he was still on the payroll. It wasn’t unusual for group meetings with Grey to be followed by a flurry of phone calls along the lines of ‘what exactly did we decide?’ Donaldson was on edge for any hint, any clue as to what it was that Grey wanted. All he knew so far was that it involved Geoff Howells, a man he thought had been dead for more than three years.

That was the last time one of his expense sheets had passed over his desk. Ridiculously high, as usual. Donaldson had enjoyed wielding the red pen, often slashing them by half. Until the day Howells had burst into Donaldson’s office. Jesus, he’d been terrified. Damn near pissed himself.

“Did you ever work with Howell’s?” asked Grey.

Donaldson shook his head. “No, but I followed his career with interest.”

“Short but eventful,” said Grey. “He managed to gain quite a reputation in a relatively short period of time.”

“Captain in the SAS, wasn’t he? Trained to kill.” And the bastard damn near killed me, thought Donaldson. He’d grabbed him by the throat and pinned him to the wall. That’s all Donaldson remembered until he woke up in the empty office with one of Howell’s expense sheets shoved between his teeth. That was the last time he’d used the red pen.

“Special Boat Section, actually. One of the best. Did a superb job during the Falklands War, led one of the advance reconnaissance teams sent in to identify the Argentinian positions. Recorded nine kills during a four-day mission.”

“Impressive,” said Donaldson.

“Problem was,” said Grey, studying a small patch of green mould on the trunk of one of the plum trees, “two of them were SAS troopers. That’s when he came to our attention.”

“What!” exploded Donaldson.

“We hushed it all up of course, we were getting enough bad publicity at the time as it was.”

By ‘we’ Donaldson assumed he meant the British.

“What happened, sir?” he asked.

“He joined one of our more low profile departments.”

“No, sir, I mean what happened to the SAS men?”

“Howells was sitting in a hole a hundred yards or so from an Argentinian artillery unit when two SAS soldiers practically fell on top of him. According to Howells one of them was about to shoot and he reacted instinctively, killed one with a punch to the throat and knocked the other to the ground and broke his neck. It was over in seconds, apparently, and the Argentinians didn’t hear a thing. He left the bodies in the hole. One of life’s little tragedies.”

Donaldson thought for a moment that Grey had made a joke, but realized that he was serious.

“We took him in and trained him. He was good, very good. One of the best, in fact. Ten clean kills in a two-year period. Never any problems, not as far as the technical side was concerned, anyway. I am going to have to speak to Perkins about this.”

“Perkins?” said Donaldson, totally confused.

“My gardener. He’s going to have to do something about this mould. It can kill the tree if it isn’t treated, you know.”

Donaldson didn’t know, and frankly he didn’t give a toss. He had only one tree at the end of his pocket-handkerchief of a garden.

“He started to enjoy the work, that was the trouble.”

Donaldson realized Grey had switched back to Howells, though he was still studying the mould intently.

“The psychologists picked it up during his monthly check-up. He was fretting when he wasn’t working and they discovered that he’d put a little too much, shall we say, effort into his last job. His target was a Libyan student who planted a messy bomb in Manchester some time back, you remember the one? Killed three people. Nothing we could prove in court so Howells’ department was told to arrange a termination. Howells decided to make it look like a car accident. And he did, too. By the time they cut the Libyan out of the wreckage there was barely an unbroken bone in his body.”

“So?” said Donaldson, though he knew what was coming.

“So that’s the way the Libyan went into the car. Howells killed him with his bare hands slowly and very painfully.

That was one of the crazy things about their line of work, mused Donaldson. You could do the job, and do it professionally, but once you started to enjoy it, you were finished. The psychologists reckoned that only a mad man could enjoy killing, but they never asked if a truly sane man would do the job in the first place. Going by the names and expense sheets that went across Donaldson’s desk, three years was as long as they normally lasted in the job, though some could go on for much longer. The CIA was rumoured to have a grandmother on their books who’d been active for nigh on thirty-five years.

“You know why he wasn’t transferred?” Donaldson didn’t, of course. “We tried to shift him over to a desk job, but Howells wouldn’t have any of it. Said he wanted to carry on doing what he was good at, what we had trained him to do. Said he wouldn’t accept a transfer.”

That happened sometimes, when operatives got so addicted to the adrenalin rush that they couldn’t bear to lose it. And if they were forcibly moved into another job they’d find another outlet for their frustrations and innocent bystanders would get hurt. It happened, but when it did

the man, or woman, was swiftly retired. And retirement didn't mean a pension and a cottage in Devon. Retirement meant permanent. It was never spoken about openly, not at Donaldson's level, anyway. But every now and again a name would just disappear from the approved-expenses list and the file would be recalled by Personnel and never seen again. Donaldson had breathed a sigh of relief when Howell's name and file had gone. The man was a nutter, a dangerous nutter.

The two men walked out of the trees and back along the lawn towards the house. Grey picked up a small dead branch and threw it for the dogs. They rushed after it, barking and barging into each other. They reached it at the same time and grabbed an end each, pulling it and grunting with pleasure. Donaldson knew exactly how the stick felt.

"Where is he now, sir?"

"Bali."

"Bali?"

"Indonesia."

This was becoming bizarre, thought Donaldson. In the space of a few minutes the conversation had gone from a threat to destroy a Chinese power station to a retired killer lying on a beach in Indonesia. And somewhere in the middle, like the stick caught between the two dogs, was Donaldson himself.

"We want to use Howells to clear up this Daya Bay business," said Grey.

"Daya Bay?"

"That's where the nuclear reactor is. We want Howells to defuse the situation."

He didn't seem to realize the pun. The black Labrador had won the tussle over the stick and came running over to Grey to present the trophy, and receive a pat on the head for her trouble. The other dog pretended to lose interest and wandered among the trees, sniffing at roots.

"Why Howells, sir?" asked Donaldson, hoping it didn't sound like criticism.

"We need someone who can't be traced back to us, someone who isn't on our books, and that rules out staffers and freelances. The Chinese mustn't know that we know, if you see what I mean. So any action we take must be completely covert."

"But surely that would also rule out Howells, sir?"

Donaldson asked though he knew what was coming and he prayed to God that he was wrong. He didn't want to meet Howells again ever.

"Because he used to work for us? That isn't a problem. He's never worked in Hong Kong or China, so it's unlikely he would be recognized. His mental problems and his retirement are no secret, and if anything goes wrong it would be assumed that he'd just gone on the rampage. I can't think anybody would believe that the British Government would use such an agent."

Donaldson agreed with that one. And his own involvement was starting to give him an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. His urge to go to the toilet was increasing by the minute. Maybe it was the tea, maybe it was the cold air, or maybe it was the thought of working with Howells that seemed to be what Grey was suggesting.

"I must repeat that it is crucial that the Chinese do not find out that the British Government is involved. The negotiations between the triads and the Chinese are being conducted at the highest

level in Peking and there is only a handful of people involved. If they discover that we know what is going on, there is a good chance it will expose our source. There must be no connection at all seen between Howells and my department.

Which, thought Donaldson, is why I'm here. To provide the distance.

"Howells isn't the man he was," continued Grey.

"In what way, sir?"

Grey thought for a while, oblivious of the dog shuffling backwards and forwards at his feet waiting for the saliva-smeared stick to be thrown.

"Have you ever had a tooth capped?" he asked.

Donaldson shook his head. What the hell did teeth have to do with this? There were times when he wondered if the older man really was starting to go gaga.

"It's worth doing if you've got a tooth that's so badly rotted that it can't be repaired with a normal amalgam filling. You build another tooth out of porcelain and metal and bond it to what's left of the original tooth. It looks real and it functions as normal."

He threw the stick hard and high and the dog hurtled after it as it curved through the air. The dog in the orchard pretended not to notice, but its tail wasn't wagging.

"Howells had a personality that was rotten to the core. For whatever reason, he'd got to the stage where he enjoyed inflicting pain, enjoyed killing. He spent six months in a private sanatorium while some of the best psychologists in the country tried to undo the damage but to no avail. Their conclusion was that Geoff Howells could never be returned to society. He was facing a lifetime in a Broadmoor cell weaving baskets."

The dog was back, stick in mouth, but Grey ignored her. The two men had returned to the back door of the house but Grey made no move to open it. Donaldson's bladder was starting to hurt.

"We decided instead to try a different method, which brings us back to the dental analogy. They produced a new personality and in effect grafted it on to the old one, just like capping a bad tooth. They used deep hypnosis and God knows what drugs to suppress all his killer instincts, dampened his feelings and emotions and overlaid them with a new set. He has the memories of what went before, but it's as if they belong to someone else. To all intents and purposes Howells is now a confirmed pacifist, as docile as a lamb. We've done a few favours for the Indonesian Government over the years so we arranged for him to live there."

Until he was needed again, thought Donaldson. Until now.

"If he's been neutralized, surely he's no good to us now, sir," said Donaldson, more in hope than belief.

Grey smiled. "The conversion isn't permanent. In the same way that a cap can be pulled off a tooth, the new personality can be removed to reveal the man he used to be. And it's that man we need."

"I still don't follow why it has to be Howells, sir. Surely we could use any freelance and just make sure our tracks are well covered."

God, that sounded like a whine. Would Charlie Muffin have said that? Would Quiller refuse to take an assignment because it meant dealing with a psychopath/sociopath? If he had any bloody sense he would.

Grey shook his head. “No, you know how they work. They all keep safety deposit boxes with envelopes to be opened in the event of their deaths. And they don’t take kindly to being used, it can have a nasty habit of backfiring. No, Howells is perfect. He has no living relatives, he will follow instructions to the letter and he is . . .”

“Expendable?” asked Donaldson hopefully.

“Exactly. I am glad we understand each other.” He seized the doorknob and pushed open the wooden door, careful not to allow the panting Labrador in. He ushered Donaldson inside where they removed their boots, then led him into the sitting-room and picked up a manila file off a small mahogany side-table. “Sit down and read this. It goes without saying that I don’t want you to take notes.” If it goes without saying, thought Donaldson, why mention it? “Come and see me when you’ve finished reading the file. I’ll be in the garden.”

Grey closed the door gently. A minute or so later Donaldson heard him let himself out of the back door and call for the dogs. He settled down into the chair and began to read, all thoughts of his bladder gone.

* * *

The Vets. Hong Kong. The British administration is preparing to hand the capitalist colony back to Communist China with the minimum of fuss. But Colonel Joel Tyler has other plans for the British colony, plans which involve four Vietnam War veterans and a spectacular mission making use of their unique skills. Vietnam was the one thing the four men had in common before Tyler moulded them into a team capable of pulling off a sensational robbery. But while the vets are preparing to take Hong Kong by storm, their paymaster, Anthony Chung, puts the final touches to an audacious betrayal. At stake is the future of Hong Kong. Here is the first chapter –

THE VETS

AS HE LEVELLED the helicopter off at 3,000 feet above the choppy South China Sea, the pilot marvelled as he always did at the way it managed to stay in the air. The cyclic control stick twitched in his right hand, the collective pitch control lever vibrated in his left, and his feet made small adjustments to the directional control pedals as he headed out to the waiting ship some six miles away in the Gulf of Tonkin. All four of his limbs were needed to keep the helicopter in the air, though he had been flying for so long that he was no longer aware of them as individual movements. He was part of the machine: his nerves and tendons ran from the rotor blades throbbing above his head to the skids below him. He could feel the blades cutting through the night air and the tail rotor fighting against the torque the blades produced, and when he swung the

helicopter to the left to make a course correction it was flesh and blood that turned and not metal; he saw only the sea and the sky, not the Plexiglas windows. He scanned his instrument panel, taking in the information from the myriad dials and gauges without reading them in the same way that his skin recorded the chill in the air and his nose picked up the smell of the fuel that had slopped over the fuel tank filler while they were preparing the helicopter at a Special Forces airfield outside Da Nang.

The pilot was alone in the cockpit and the second set of controls in front of the co-pilot's seat moved as if guided by ghostly hands and feet, mirroring his own actions. During his year-long tour of duty with 1st Cav, he'd never flown solo on a mission, but Air America did things differently and he hadn't been surprised when he'd been told that he'd be flying alone.

He clicked the microphone trigger switch on his cyclic control stick and identified himself to the target ship which was still some two miles away, bobbing in the sea like a toy boat. He had no problems communicating with the ship on the prearranged VHF frequency and he decreased power to the 1,100 shp Lycoming T53-L-11 turboshaft engine as he made his approach.

It was dusk and there was enough light to see by, but just to be on the safe side he thumbed the switch on the collective pitch control lever which turned on the search-light mounted under the front of the Huey to give him a better view of the deck of the ship as it bucked and tossed in the waves. A guy with a torch in either hand guided him down until he was hovering just six feet above the heaving deck and then the pilot chose his moment, cut the power and dropped, pulling back the cyclic, and dropping the collective at the last moment to cushion the impact as best he could. The guy drew his hand across his throat telling the pilot to cut his engine but he'd already done it and slammed on the rotor brake. More men rushed forward to tie the Huey down as the pilot removed his flight helmet and put it on the co-pilot's seat.

A man with a blond crew cut, wearing civilian clothes, appeared from somewhere, took the pilot by the upper arm, and guided him below deck to a tiny steel-lined cabin containing a folding bunk and a wooden chair on which was a green file and a plastic mapcase.

"That's your flight plan," said the man. "Anything else you want?" He hadn't introduced himself, nor did he ask to see any identification from the pilot.

"Just water," said the pilot.

He sat down on the bed and studied the maps and papers. A few minutes later the man with the crew cut came back with a glass of water which he handed to the pilot without a word before leaving and closing the door behind him. The pilot took a mouthful of the cold water and then placed the glass on the floor. He looked at the solid gold Rolex on his wrist. It was just before eight o'clock and according to the flight plan he was due to take off at 2200 hours. The course he was to fly was marked on the map in red, north-west up to the coast near Quang Tri, then due west across Vietnam to the border with Laos. He was to follow the border up twenty clicks and then cut into Laos towards a town which was marked as Muang Xepon. There were no details as to how he was to find the LZ but that was nothing unusual. When you flew for Air America almost everything was on a need-to-know basis. That would explain the missing co-pilot. Presumably one of the passengers would be sitting in the co-pilot's station to help guide him in.

The flight would be 275 klicks, 550 klicks there and back, and he'd be carrying four passengers and a small cargo. The standard Huey had a range of about 540 klicks with its 200-gallon capacity but the UH-1E had been fitted with extra fuel tanks and it now had a range closer to 700 klicks. The pilot would have preferred to have refuelled at a Special Forces camp closer to the border but whoever had planned the mission obviously didn't want the chopper on the ground between the ship and its final destination. The take-off would be tricky, but once they'd burned off a few gallons they'd have no problems. It would be a milk run. After the drop in Laos they'd be returning to the ship. The pilot took off his leather shoulder holster and slid out his .25 calibre handgun, checked that it was fully loaded and that the safety was on and put it on the chair. He read through the papers, rechecked the maps, and then lay down on the bunk and stared up at the ceiling, relaxed but not asleep. He pictured an ice cube in his mind, a square block which he allowed gradually to melt until nothing remained but a pool of water which slowly evaporated. His breathing slowed and his pulse rate dropped and his mind was empty. He stayed that way until a sharp knock on the door announced that it was time to go.

The man with the crew cut took him back to the Huey where the restraining ropes were being untied. The pilot carried out his pre-flight checks then strapped himself in to the high-backed armoured seat before checking the positions of the circuit breakers and switches. Satisfied, he looked back over his shoulder to see if there was any sign of his passengers.

Four men were walking towards the Huey. All were dressed in tiger-stripe fatigues and bush hats and had camouflage streaks of green and brown across their faces which blended so well into the material of their uniforms that he couldn't see where skin ended and material began. They walked two abreast, the men in front carrying rifles at the ready, the two behind with their weapons shouldered as they manhandled a heavy metal chest between them. As they got closer the pilot could see the weapons they were carrying. One of the men in front, the thinner of the two, carried a Commando submachine-gun, a variation of the standard M16 infantry rifle, and the man on his right held a Kalashnikov AK-47, the Soviet assault rifle which had become the weapon of choice of the Viet Cong. The pilot wasn't surprised to see the AK-47 in the hands of a Special Forces soldier. They tended to use whatever gear they were comfortable with, and there were obvious advantages of operating with VC equipment in enemy territory. The man who was carrying his end of the chest with his left hand had an M16 slung over his shoulder and what looked to be a sawn-off shotgun hanging from his belt. His companion on the other end of the chest had an M16 and a radio on his back. Apart from the weaponry, there was little to tell the four men apart: all were lean and wiry, all were clean-shaven with no hair showing under the floppy brush hats and all moved with a fluid grace that brought to mind images of lions on the prowl.

The man with the Commando walked around the Huey and pulled himself in to the co-pilot's seat and nodded as the pilot handed him a flight helmet. The other three man-handled the chest through the doorway, grunting as they slid it along the metal floor. They climbed in and pulled the sliding door shut behind them.

The pilot pushed in the igniter circuit breaker and prepared to start the turbine. Before he squeezed the trigger switch he became aware of a knocking sound coming from somewhere within the Huey, a tapping that he felt rather than heard. It was like Morse code. Dit-dit-dit-daa. Dit-dit-dit-daa. Three short taps and a long one. The Morse code signal for V, and also the first notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, being repeated over and over again. He twisted around but he couldn't see where it was coming from. He shrugged and settled back in his seat. As he gave his instruments a quick visual scan he saw that the noise was coming from the man in the co-pilot's seat. His right hand held the Commando barrel up between his legs while his left hand was against the bulkhead. He was tapping, three times with the tips of his fingers, the fourth with the flat of his hand. A sign of nerves, Doherty reckoned, but once he started the T53 turboshaft engine the tapping sounds were lost.

The pilot waited for the exhaust-gas temperature gauge to settle into the green before opening the throttle. He pulled on the collective, increasing the power to the whirling blades and lifting the Huey off the deck before nudging it forward with a push on the cyclic. The Huey was sluggish, loaded down as it was with the extra fuel, and the pilot took it up slowly to 3,000 feet. It was a cloudless night and a full moon hung in the sky and the pilot could see clear to the horizon.

Forty minutes later they flew over a narrow strip of beach and above the jungle which shone blackly in the moonlight. The pilot took the Huey up another thousand feet. The thinner air meant he'd burn fuel up faster but they had plenty in reserve. He followed the course on the map he'd been given, climbing way above the mountain ranges where VC snipers were prone to take pot-shots at passing helicopters, no matter how high they were. There was no indication of where Vietnam ended and Laos began but the pilot knew that two hours after leaving the ship he'd crossed over whatever border existed. The knife-edged ridges far below were no different from the mountain ranges in the west of Vietnam and he knew that the Viet Cong criss-crossed the border as if it didn't exist. The map meant nothing, in the air or on the ground.

The pilot felt a touch on his arm and turned to see the man in the co-pilot's seat mouthing to him. He reached over and showed him how to operate the microphone trigger switch on the cyclic.

"Can you take it down?" he said, the voice crackling in the pilot's ear.

"Sure," he said, dropping the collective pitch and nosing the Huey down with the cyclic. He levelled off a thousand feet or so above the jungle while the passenger peered out of the window.

"What are you looking for?" asked the pilot.

"A river," said the man. "A river shaped like a heart. It's within fifteen clicks of that range." He pointed to a steep rocky outcrop which speared through the jungle like an accusing finger.

"It's not on the map," said the pilot.

The man ignored him and kept looking out of the side window. "Lower," he said.

The pilot eased the Huey down until it was about 200 feet above the treetops.

"There she is," said the man, pointing.

“Got it,” said the pilot, turning the Huey towards the thin ribbon of water. It did look like an oddly stretched heart, as if the river had lost its sense of direction for a few miles and almost turned in a circle before realising its mistake.

“Go as low as you can,” said the passenger. “There’s a clearing about one klick from the base of the heart.”

As the pilot guided the Huey down he saw a light flash on the ground, then another.

“See the lights?” said the passenger.

“I see them,” replied the pilot.

“Land between them.”

The pilot put the Huey in a hover about ten feet above the thick grass of the clearing while he checked for obstructions as best he could. Seeing none, he reduced the power and put the skids softly on the ground. There was no sign of whoever had been holding the flashlights that had guided them in.

The passenger clicked the intercom on. “We’ll be gone for about five minutes, not much longer. Keep the blades turning in case we have to leave in a hurry.”

The passenger pulled off his flight helmet. He left it on the floor as he climbed out of the Huey. His hair was blond, cut close to his skull, and it gleamed in the moonlight. The pilot felt the Huey shudder as the cargo door was opened and he turned to watch the men haul the chest out. The four men moved cautiously towards the treeline as the rotor blades beat the air above their heads. They bent down like grunts always did, fearful that the blades would take off their heads, even though there was more than enough room. You’d have to be a basketball player leaping in the air to stand a chance of being hit by the main rotor. The tail rotor was a different matter; the pilot had seen two grunts killed by running the wrong way when leaving a Huey. The rotor was a fraction of the size of the one on top but it was the perfect height for taking off a man’s head.

The four men disappeared into the undergrowth leaving the pilot feeling suddenly alone. He shivered and leant back in his seat, filling his mind with the melting ice cube. If there was a VC out in the jungle with his name on a bullet there was nothing he could do about it. He blocked out thoughts of what might be and concentrated on the cold, wet, ice.

A firefly sparked to his left, a red dot that glowed briefly and then was gone. Ice. Melting ice. Another spark, then another. He ignored them. A fourth appeared but this didn’t disappear, it moved in a straight line, blinking on and off. The pilot realised with a jolt that it wasn’t a flying insect but a light in the far distance, the blinking effect caused by it passing behind trees. He killed the lights on his instrument panel and widened his eyes, trying to calculate the distance between him and the lights as they came down the hill. One klick? Maybe two? Maybe closer. He swung around and looked anxiously at the vegetation at the edge of the clearing. There was no sign of the men. He put his hand on the butt of the gun in his shoulder holster, the metal warm to the touch. He could fire a warning shot, but that was just as likely to attract the attention of whoever was on the hillside as it was to bring the Special Forces guys back. But he had no other way of getting in touch with them, they hadn’t told him the frequency their radio operated on. He

took his hand off the gun and rubbed his face. The lights were getting closer. There were three of them. As he watched, the lights disappeared one by one.

The rule was that the pilot stayed with the slick, but he couldn't face sitting in the Huey waiting for whoever it was to arrive. He had to do something. He had to warn them and get the hell out. He peered up the hillside. No more lights. He could picture them moving in the darkness, crouching low with AK-47s in their hands, black pyjamas and wide, conical hats. He shuddered.

He slapped the cyclic stick in frustration and swore before climbing down from the Huey and running towards the area where he'd last seen the men take the chest. He hated the jungle with a vengeance. The only time he felt comfortable with it was when he was looking down on it from a great height. Long, scratchy things clawed at his shirt as if they were alive, and damp fronds wrapped themselves around his face as if they wanted to squeeze the life out of him. Something squelched under his foot but it was too dark to see what it was. He stopped and listened but all he could hear was the whup-whup of the Huey behind him. He pushed on through the undergrowth, feeling his way with his gloved hands in front of his face. He heard water only seconds before he splashed into a stream which came up to his knees. It was slow-moving and no danger but it was uncomfortable. He thought of leeches and river snakes and waded through quickly, slipping once on a wet rock.

In the distance he saw a yellowish glow and he moved towards it, praying that it was the Special Forces team and not another group of Viet Cong. He slowed down as he came closer to the light, and peered around a massive tree trunk around which wound thick veins, like varicose veins on an old woman's leg. He saw the young man with the Commando and was just about to shout to attract his attention when something stopped him. The Commando was levelled at a group of what the pilot guessed were Laotian mercenaries, dark-skinned men with high cheekbones and narrow eyes, some with AK-47s, others with wicked-looking machetes. There were about a dozen, some of them little more than children carrying weapons that were almost as big as they were. The three other Special Forces men were facing the mercenaries, spaced so that they couldn't be cut down with one burst of automatic fire.

In between the two groups were three hemp sacks lined up on the ground next to a small campfire which was clearly the source of the glow he had seen when he entered the jungle. One of the Laotians was kneeling by the middle sack and cutting a small hole in it with a curved knife. He dug the blade into the sack and it came out with white powder on the end. He carefully carried it over to the man with the Commando, one hand held under the knife to catch any spillage. The American licked the tip. He nodded to the other Special Forces men, a white smile breaking through the painted face.

The pilot couldn't take his eyes off the scene that was being played out in front of him, even though he knew the danger from the men on the hill was growing by the minute. The Laotian sheathed his knife and walked over to the chest standing about six feet or so in front of the two men who'd carried it. They stepped back, their guns in the ready position, as the mercenary leaned down to open it. Two more of the mercenaries moved forward to stand either side of him.

From where he was standing behind the tree, the pilot couldn't see what was in the chest. He slowly went down on all fours and crept along the damp jungle floor, moving slowly and taking great care where he put his hands, until he reached a tree with thick, rubbery leaves. He hugged its trunk and peered around. He now was looking at the backs of the Laotians, and through their legs he could see inside the open chest. Blocks of metal gleamed in the light of the flickering fire. The mercenary who had opened the sack bent down and picked up one of the blocks. He had to use both hands, and even from thirty feet away the pilot knew it could only be gold. He knew he was seeing something more than a simple "need-to-know" CIA operation. The Special Forces men were about to swap the gold for drugs and the Huey was to fly the drugs back to the ship. The pilot was confused. He'd heard of Air America planes being used to ferry drugs around for the Thai drug barons as a way of getting them to help in the fight against the VC, but what he was seeing was something different. The Americans were paying for the drugs, with gold; it wasn't a case of doing a favour for the Laotians or supplying them with cash or arms. This was a straightforward drug deal he was witnessing.

For the first time he became aware of another group of Laotians standing further behind and to the right of the mercenaries on the edge of the circle of warm light cast by the fire. The group was composed of women and very small children. One of the women held a baby in her arms and she was making small shushing noises to keep it from crying. Whereas the men were dressed in khaki combat fatigues, the women and children wore brightly coloured clothes made from red, green, yellow and blue striped material, the girls in skirts, the small boys in leggings. The women had their hair tied back and were wearing strips of cloth wound around their heads like badly tied turbans.

The pilot wanted to shout a warning to the Americans, to tell them that they had to go, but he was unsure how they'd react to him being there. The decision was made for him when the American with the Commando fired at the three Laotians standing by the chest, cutting them down before they had a chance to raise their weapons. The three other Americans fired almost immediately afterwards and bullets ripped through the foliage near where the pilot was standing. Those mercenaries who weren't killed outright were screaming in pain, flowers of blood spreading across their fatigues. The women and children made as if to move forward to help their men but one of the women, old with shrivelled skin and no teeth, shouted to them and waved them back. The pilot reached for the automatic pistol in his shoulder holster but didn't draw it out. What could he do? Shoot the American's? Plead with them to stop the slaughter? Tell them he'd report them when they got back to the ship? None of the choices was viable. He let the butt slide from his sweating fingers. The women and children turned and ran, stumbling and tripping in their panic. The four Americans fired together, raking the Laotians with a hail of bullets, the individual weapons making separate identifiable sounds but the end result was the same; women and children falling to the ground and dying.

A gasp escaped involuntarily from the pilot's mouth and he tasted bitter vomit at the back of his throat. His ears were hurting from the sound of the guns and even when the firing stopped they were still ringing, making it hard to think. The humid night air was thick with the smell of

cordite and hot metal. The two men who'd carried the chest from the Huey ran over to it and closed the lid. The guy with the Commando shouted something and one of the men went to the dead Laotian with the knife and kicked him over on to his back, searching the ground until he found the gold bar he'd picked up before he died. The bar was returned to the chest, one of them looked in the pilot's direction. He pointed and the pilot flinched as if he'd been fired at. While watching the massacre he'd stepped away from the tree without realising it and now he could clearly be seen in the firelight. His feet felt as if they were rooted to the ground. The man with the Commando stepped forward, walking slowly with the barrel of his gun lowered. He stopped when he was about thirty feet away from the pilot, his face in darkness because the fire was behind him. The pilot couldn't see his face but he could feel the man's eyes boring into him. He could hear the blood pounding through his veins and feel the sweat clinging to his forehead. He knew he had never been so close to death and that everything depended on how he reacted. He dropped his hands to his sides and gave a half shrug as if nothing mattered. The man with the Commando stood stock still, his feet planted shoulder width apart, his left side slightly closer to the pilot than his right, the perfect shooting position. The barrel of the gun was still pointed at the ground. The pilot widened his smile. He knew that his face was clearly visible in the firelight, that they could see his every expression.

The man's upper body appeared to relax as if he'd come to a decision and the pilot let out a sigh of relief. He was about to step forward when the Commando swung. The pilot dived without thinking, throwing himself to his left and rolling on the ground before scrambling away into the undergrowth. He didn't look back so he didn't see the muzzle flashes but he felt the air crack as bullets passed within inches of his head. He ran by instinct, dodging trees before they loomed out of the darkness, avoiding vines on the ground without seeing them, jumping the stream without getting wet, as if his subconscious mind had recorded every step of his journey through the jungle and was now replaying it in reverse because it knew that if it made one wrong move he'd be dead. His breath came in ragged bursts and his arms pumped up and down as he ran, his eyes wide with fear, his muscles screaming in agony as his feet pounded on the jungle floor.

He burst out of the jungle into the clearing and ran headlong towards the Huey, throwing himself into the pilot's seat and pulling on the collective before he'd even sat down. The turbine whined and the blades speeded up until they were a blurred circle above his head. Relieved of the weight of its four passengers and cargo it soared almost vertically out of the clearing. From the corner of his eye he saw the four Special Forces men tear out of the undergrowth and point their guns at him. Red dots streamed past the Huey and up into the night and he heard a series of bangs behind him, thuds of metal against metal. He wagged his directional pedals frantically, jerking the slick from left to right to make himself less of a target, all the time increasing the power to the rotors to give it extra lift.

It was only when the altimeter showed 2,000 feet that he relaxed. He put the Huey into a hover while he considered his next move. He pushed the right pedal and nudged the cyclic to the right and pointed the nose of the Huey east, towards Vietnam. A thousand thoughts crowded into his head, all seeking attention, but they were dulled by the conflicting emotions he felt: horror at

what he'd seen, guilt for not doing anything to stop it, anger at the men behind the massacre, terror at being hunted, fear of what would happen to him when he got back to the ship. If he got back. He took deep breaths and tried to focus his thoughts, to bring some sort of order to his bewildered mind. When it happened it happened suddenly, without him knowing, the way water freezes, turning from liquid to solid so quickly that there is no borderline between the two states. One moment he was in total confusion, the next he knew with perfect clarity what he would do.

He pushed the cyclic to the left and pressed the left foot pedal, swinging the Huey round and losing height because he didn't increase power, until the helicopter was pointing in the opposite direction, due west. He hovered for a moment, steadying his breathing, concentrating on the block of ice in his mind, feeling the helicopter react to the small, almost imperceptible, movements of his hands and feet, absorbing the data from the instruments. He sighed, a deep mournful emptying of his lungs, then pulled on the collective and pushed the cyclic forward. The turbine roared and the Huey jumped forward as if eager to go. Within minutes the pilot had the Huey up to its maximum speed of 138 mph, flying low and level, just above the treetops, as the ice block slowly melted to cool, clear water.

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